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Art in the Stages of Suffering and Death
Joanna Aramini
December 15, 2018

Abstract: There has always been a strong link between art and the study of science and medicine, and one of the most iconic images of suffering and death in history to date is Christ suffering on the cross. In this thesis, I examine if and how art can make it possible to transcend human pain and overcome suffering, especially in our modern society where pain is seen as something we cannot deal with, and where we look to medicine and prescriptions to diminish it. I argue that art in the states of suffering and death, closely examining Michelangelo's La Pieta and Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, can provide a model as a response to pain. For all their differences in composition and artistic style, Michelangelo and Grunewald's works of art encourage their viewers to focus on pain as a distinctly human experience, in which hope and peace can be found. Pain then, finds a special meaning as a "craft," which can be made well if we assume some responsibility for our own suffering rather than turning to artificial means of diminishing pain.

What is "art"? Is it the expression and symbol of human imagination, or is it a visual creative form such as a painting or sculpture? Is it something that can be possessed by the human mind, and can it cultivate a way of thinking?

Let's take the latter. Think of your favorite piece of art. What emotions does it provoke in you, if any at all? Does it make you feel happy, sad, hopeful, or mournful? The point is, it makes you feel *something*. Although mainly comprising of visual elements, art provokes human emotion.

Take the iconic symbol of Christ dying on the cross. Think of how you *see* this symbol-- Is it in a painting? In a sculpture? From a sketch in a book? In whichever form you mostly see this image, the fact of the matter is that all of these are forms of art. Since we are able to see this image before our eyes, we are able to imagine an event we will never know the complete truth of.

This is one of the great wonders of art; it has the power to make us believe, which is why it has been so important to different histories and cultures; a most well known example being early Christian/Catholic art, specifically in Italy and other European countries. In this context, art was used to spread stories, make them understandable and accessible to all, and provide objects and images of worship to the common people. Images of Bible stories and Christ's life and suffering were common themes in religious works of art. The latter would not only share Christ's story with a wide audience, but would also provide belief and hope through his suffering.

Since, art has proven the ability to change and influence people's views of suffering and death. The creation and reproduction of images and sculptures of Christ's death and suffering make it a common theme in art, even today. Although art can be a mechanism of telling Christ's story, it also provides a platform to justify suffering, depicted through triumphant images. In this context, art can be used as a coping mechanism and can provide hope through the images of Christ's suffering.

Two well known works of art depicting scenes of suffering in the life of Christ are Michelangelo's *Pieta* (1498) [figure 1] and Matthias Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (1516) [figure 2]. The former, a sculpture of Mary holding her deceased son soon after he is taken off of the cross, is ironically a realistically gory scene sculpted with such grace and elegance. The latter, a painted altarpiece depicting Jesus on the cross, shows a realistic version of the true suffering of His death. Although very different in composition, both works of art portray the possible transcendence of human pain and triumph over suffering.

This leads the reader to think- *how* is it possible to transcend human pain and overcome suffering? In today's society, we look towards artificial methods. Pain killing and the prescribing and use of medicine has changed the way our society views pain; pain is thought to be something we cannot deal with, it must be medicated in order to be diminished. Pain has become something fixable for many through the use of modern medicine.

Although pain killers have been around for thousands of years, they were not very popular upon creation.¹ However, today, our society is so reliant on dismissing physical pain through artificial ways, that we have forgotten the natural ways in which pain can be subsided; the ways which were used when pain medication was not popular or as easily accessible to everyone. The emphasis on the physicality of pain and the utilization of medicine to dismiss it blinds those suffering from healthy, mental ways to cope.

It is important for one to remember that pain is not a current phenomenon; everyone everywhere has felt pain in some way, whether it be physical or mental. It is not something “new.” Ironically, the ways individuals deal with pain have fluctuated, and have gained, or lost, importance in how death and suffering are viewed in today’s society.

There have been many linkages made between art and medicine throughout history, demonstrated by Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings² and Andreas Vesalius' beautifully illustrated anatomical textbook, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septum*³, from the 16th century.⁴ Both well trained artists were hired to produce illustrations that depicted internal human anatomy, making the invisible visible through their work. These examples represent a universally well known association between art and anatomy. Clinicians’ future studies of works

¹“Painkillers: A Short History,” Foundation for a Drug Free World, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.drugfreeworld.org/drugfacts/painkillers/a-short-history.html>.

²Shoja MM, Agutter PS, Loukas M, Benninger B, Shokouhi G, Namdar H, Ghabili K, Khalili M, Tubbs RS. 2013. Leonardo da Vinci's studies of the heart. *Int J Cardiol* 167:1126–1133.

³Benini A, Bonar SK. 1996. Andreas Vesalius 1514–1564. *Spine* 21:1388–1393.

⁴Bell, Lawrence T. O., and Darrell J. R. Evans. 2014. “Art, Anatomy, and Medicine: Is There a Place for Art in Medical Education?” *Anatomical Sciences Education* 7 (5): 370–78. doi:10.1002/ase.1435.

such as these, which have allowed for improvements in their anatomical knowledge and clinical practice,⁵ suggest the strong ties between art and medicine.

However, there is another important linkage between art and medicine; its ability to provide pain relief and coping mechanisms, which has been scientifically proven.⁶ Most recently, the ability of art to decrease sensations of pain and the feeling of loneliness associated with pain has been proven by Ian Koebner, a Harvard graduate and current Professor of pain management at the University of California, in 2018.⁷ In his “The Art of Analgesia” experiment, 54 participations, of whom the average age was 59 and two thirds were female, looked at 3-4 works of art in the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California.⁸ Ian and his colleagues evaluated the discomfort and social disconnection associated with chronic pain in the participates after their hour long tour. Results concluded that 57% of the participants reported pain relief during their tour, often reporting an average reduction in pain of nearly 50%. Participants also stated positive effects on feelings of social disconnection.⁹

In sum, art can provide a means for substituting painkillers. Art has proven its ability to lessen pain. Although it may not be as effective as medication for everyone, it certainly serves a role in dealing with death, suffering, and pain. In a society that depends on pain-killing, we often forget

⁵Geranmayeh F, Ashkan K. 2008. Mind on canvas: Anatomy, signs and neurosurgery in art. *Br J Neurosurg* 22:563–574.

⁶“The Art of Pain Relief: How Museums May Help Address Chronic Pain,” UC Davis Health, last modified August 8, 2018, <https://health.ucdavis.edu/publish/news/newsroom/13091>.

⁷“A(n)esthetics: The Art of Analgesia,” Tufts University School of Medicine, last modified September 11, 2018, <http://sites.tufts.edu/prep/2018/09/11/anesthetics-the-art-of-analgesia/>.

⁸“A(n)esthetics: The Art of Analgesia”

⁹“The Art of Pain Relief”

the magical wonders art can provide for us; art *also* serves the function of helping people cope with pain, which is very different from modern ways of coping.

Because our society has become so dependent on the medicalization of pain and has forgotten other ways of coping, a new idea of what it means to suffer has been shaped. Suffering has become something that can be done “well.” Just as painkillers evoke a sense of “suffering well,” so does art, arguably in a healthier way. The above mentioned works by Michelangelo and Grunewald make its viewer question what is craft to suffering well, and provides evidence for how objects can help us understand how we (should) deal with suffering.

Thus far, we have solidified the idea that art provides coping mechanisms to those suffering and in pain, which in turn has crafted the idea of “suffering well.” However, behind these work of art is an artist with intention. Although it cannot be clearly stated if these artists intended to provide hope through their artwork, it can be argued that both Michelangelo’s and Grunewald’s religious works do such that.

However, to be an adequate art historian, one must look beyond visual elements. In fully comprehending a work of art, it is important to familiarize yourself with the life of the artist and the social context of the art work, as both can offer great insight into their masterpieces.

Lives of the Artists

Many know Michelangelo as the “divine Italian artist,” but why is he given such a name?

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, known as the great artist Michelangelo, was born on March 6, 1474-5 in Caprese, Italy, a Tuscan village where his father served as a magistrate of the Florentine republic,¹⁰ and upon moving to Florence in 1250, the family legally changed their name to “Buonarroti.” The name “Buonaroto” had been passed down in their family through the ages, becoming the name of the family Michelangelo was born into.¹¹

Born in the year of salvation for the city of Caprese four hours before daylight, Michelangelo’s birth is said to have foreshadowed his greatness and genius qualities he was to possess later in life. Michelangelo’s natal horoscope, receiving Mercury and Venus under the ruling planet of Jupiter, promised what later followed: a life of noble and lofty genius, exuberating benefic, luck, and universal success; qualities attributed to his astrological sign.¹² Michelangelo’s birth was predestined, similar to Christ’s, and from birth, it was evident that Michelangelo would succeed in any undertaking, specifically those of painting, sculpture, and architecture.

Although there are references to Michelangelo as a child, information about his early years, outside of Italian writer Asciano Condivi’s accounts, scarcely exist. In *The Life of Michelangelo*, Condivi acknowledges the recognition of his intelligence and ability by his father, who sends him to Latin grammar school under the highly educated Francesco da Urbino. The age at which Michelangelo attended formal schooling is unknown, but the pattern of education in Italy during

¹⁰Nathaniel Harris, *The Life and Works of Michelangelo* (Great Britain: Parragon Book Service Limited, 1995), 5.

¹¹Asciano Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo* (United States: The Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 5-6.

¹²Asciano Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*

this time suggests that he would have been eleven years old.¹³ While at school, Michelangelo would often run off to draw and surround himself with painters, one of whom he became very close with named Francesco Granacci, an artist of little societal status.¹⁴ Granacci understood Michelangelo's desire for art, and he began encouraging his creativity through providing drawings and taking him to his workshop. Michelangelo soon decided to quit grammar school, and although he was severely punished by his father for it, he was unstoppable in pursuing art.¹⁵

Michelangelo excelled in all of his work, and worked with such diligence that he would not apply color or paint real life images unless he first consulted nature. Michelangelo's work amazed both Granacci and his teacher Domenico del Ghirlandaio so much so that Ghirlandaio would claim he had part in helping the young prodigy in order to make his work seem less remarkable.

Without Ghirlandaio's consent, Granacci took 15-year old Michelangelo to the Medici Garden in S. Marco, where Lorenzo the Magnificent (the father of Pope Leo) offered him a room in his household after seeing his great talent in his reworking of one of the garden's sculpture, *Head of the Faun*. Disappointing his father still, Michelangelo agreed to Lorenzo's offer and lived in his house where he was treated with great authority for about two years until the latter's death in 1492. Michelangelo then returned home to his father, who began to treat him more worthily, as he saw that he was often in the presence of distinguished men.¹⁶

¹³ Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame* (United States: Yale University Press, 2011), 7-8.

¹⁴ Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame*

¹⁵ Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*

¹⁶ Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*

Michelangelo began taking his studies more seriously when he started making small sculptures and crucifixes for the great Florentine church of Sto. Spirito. Through this church, he was given a room and corpses for the study of anatomy. Michelangelo worked in Florence for years producing many works of art; one of which, the marble sculpture *Eros*, was discovered by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco of the Medici family. Although satisfied with the *Eros*, Lorenzo asked Michelangelo to rework it to make it appear as if it were made many years earlier, and once Michelangelo delivered, the two traveled to Rome where they could sell the sculpture. Now in Rome, Michelangelo began producing sculptures for the cardinal and “Roman gentleman of fine intellect.”¹⁷ His works were showcased in venues of higher significance, such as chapels of kings and churches, through which he acquired great fame and reputation at only 23 years old.

From then on, Michelangelo became a dominant figure in both culture and art, serving as a great role model for future artists to follow. Michelangelo thus lived a modest and prosperous life, full of praise for his imagination, gratefulness, and humility. Even after his death from a short illness in 1564 at the age of 88,¹⁸ his legacy reigns among all. It is no wonder Condivi ends his famous biography of the great artist with: “I will prove to the world how great are his powers of invention and how many beautiful ideas spring from that divine spirit. And with this, I make an end.”¹⁹

¹⁷Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, 23

¹⁸Nathaniel Harris, *The Life and Works of Michelangelo*

¹⁹Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, 109

Unlike Michelangelo, the biography of Grunewald is much less well known and much less documented. It is noted that Grunewald was first written about in 1675, by the “German Vasari” Joachim von Sandrart.²⁰ In his biographies, Grunewald was not related to divine figures as Michelangelo was, but he was spoken about in the same greatness; emphasis lied on his title as the “greatest painter of German Renaissance” and “its [the Renaissance’s] greatest colorist.”²¹

Throughout history, Grunewald’s biographies have been intermittently expanded and confused, but not substantially changed. The destruction of archives in Frankfurt, Aschaffenburg, and Mainz (Germany), and the fact that Meister Mathis was a very common name in the area where Grunewald worked, it has been difficult for biographers to assemble the basic information surrounding his early life. A mythology about the artist gradually established itself, and it is said that the only reasonably sure thing writers can be certain of was Sandrart’s description of Grunewald having “melancholic disposition,” and being “unhappily married.”²² Thus, the literature must be consulted with caution because scholars often indiscriminately applied almost any archival reference to a “Meister Mathis” to Grunewald’s biography,²³ as it must be for Michelangelo as well through the unrealistic expectations of a “divine” being. Although both artist’s biographies must be taken into serious consideration, their works are undoubtedly unparalleled in their extraordinary beauty and and expressive nature.

²⁰ Ann Stieglitz, “The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grunewald’s Isenheim Altar after the First World War,” *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 2 (1989): 89.

²¹ Christiane Andersson, “Grunewald, Matthias,” Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000035179?&mediaType=Article>

²² Ann Stieglitz, “The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grunewald’s Isenheim Altar after the First World War,” *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 2 (1989): 89.

²³ Christiane Andersson, “Grunewald, Matthias,” Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000035179?&mediaType=Article>

Born “Mathis Gothart Neithart” in Wurzburg, Germany in 1475/1480²⁴, around the same time as Michelangelo, “Meister Mathis,” as he was known as, is first documented in 1505 when he was commissioned to paint and inscribe the epitaph of Johann Reitzmann, vicar of the collegiate church of Aschaffenburg. The first dated painting, *The Mocking of Christ*, was commissioned in 1503 and finished between 1504 and 1506.

Aside from being a painter, Grunewald also served as a hydraulic engineer, and was first documented as such in 1510 when he was called to Bingen to repair a fountain. It was around this time Grunewald started gaining popularity, after entering the service of Uriel von Gemmingen, archbishop of Mainz. Grunewald went on to work for the archbishop in Aschaffenburg, the Dominican church in Frankfurt, and the monastery of Saint Anthony.²⁵ Many of Grunewald’s works are rooted in the symbolic imagery of the Middle Ages, especially the mysticism of the 14th century, but at the same time expressed proto-Baroque characteristics of dramatic movement, in the highly expressive language of drapery forms and gestures and in the strong contrasts of light and shadow.²⁶

Upon Grunewald’s death in 1528,²⁷ he too is known as a great artist whose works will live on throughout time. He was a man of profound religious beliefs whose vision transcended the

²⁴“Matthias Grunewald,” National Gallery of Art, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1362.html>.

²⁵ibid.

²⁶ibid.

²⁷ibid.

visible world and led him to paint some of the most moving and memorable images of Christ's Passion in Western art.

Both Michelangelo and Grunewald, as artists known for great technique, have focused on religious works of art; Michelangelo's most famous being his *Pieta* sculpture, and Grunewald's being his painted Isenheim Altarpiece. Although depicting slightly different religious scenes through different mediums, both works of art portray the possible transcendence of human pain and triumph over suffering-- abilities which are thought today as only achievable through pain medication. Because these works were made during a time when painkillers were not the most popular "answer" to reducing pain, there is something to be said about the natural qualities of these works that provided pain relief similar to modern day painkillers. These works, through both the realistic and unrealistic depictions of what it means to suffer, lessen the viewers pain by artistically offering a sense of hope and a way to cope with pain.

Pieta as a Theme

Michelangelo's *Pieta* is thought to be one of his most famous works, especially since it is the only one he has signed, but the question of how and why did this image come into being must be raised.

Never being described in the gospels, the pieta as a theme in Christian art developed during the end of the 13th century²⁸ in Germany,²⁹ and remained important in Christian art and devotion

²⁸Richard Harries, "The Pieta in Art," lecture recorded March 31, 2015, <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-pieta-in-art>

²⁹"Pieta," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pieta-iconography>

until the 17th century³⁰ [figures 3, 4, 5]. In Germany, the theme of the pieta was a recurring element of gothic art, and it did not spread until a few decades later to Orthodox churches in Spain and Russia, from which it spread to France and Italy³¹ during the Early Renaissance.³² The Italian word “pieta” translates to “pity,” but the German word “vesperbild,” from the Latin word “vespers,” described this famous theme when it first originated; because the image was particularly associated with evening prayer, since it was the evening of Good Friday when the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross.³³ After its first appearance, it soon spread to France and became very popular in Northern Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries.³⁴ Although the pieta remained mostly a Franco-German theme, its supreme representation is that completed by Michelangelo.

The theme of the pieta, which has no literary source, grew out of the theme of the lamentation over Christ’s body. A story in the gospel, the lamentation is a scene depicting Jesus’ body taken down from the cross to be mourned. As the lamentation specifically mentions Mary mourning over her deceased son, the pieta is the depiction of Mary actually holding him. In this light, a pieta can be seen as a lamentation in which only Mary is mourning her son. The pieta is considered to be one of a collection of thematic subjects that show Mary's grief at the death of Jesus. Other representational examples of Mary's suffering include the *Mater Dolorosa* (meaning mother of sorrows), in which Mary's heart is being pierced by seven swords representing the

³⁰Richard Harries, “The Pieta in Art,” lecture recorded March 31, 2015, <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-pieta-in-art>

³¹Joanna Ziegler, “Michelangelo and the Medieval Pieta,” accessed November 24, 2018, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.holycross.edu:2048/eds/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=335f2ff7-d477-470f-ae0-0e38a3d4a3cd%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=87324352&db=ers>

³²“Pieta,” Encyclopedia of Art History, accessed November 1, 2018, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/pieta.htm>

³³Richard Harries, “The Pieta in Art,” lecture recorded March 31, 2015, <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-pieta-in-art>

³⁴“Pieta,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pieta-iconography>

emblematic seven sorrows of her life, and the *Stabat Mater* (the mother was standing), where Mary is shown standing under the crucified body of Jesus at the foot of the cross. Together, these thematic representations of Mary are considered to be artistic depictions of the Lamentation of Christ.³⁵ Some representations of the pieta include John the Apostle, Mary Magdalene, and sometimes other figures on the sides of Mary, but the majority of pieta's show only Mary and her son. The pieta became one of the most poignant visual expressions of emotional aspects of the life of Jesus and his mother.

The traditional pieta depicted Mary bearing the body of Christ on her knees, and this format remained prominent until the 16th century, when, influenced by the Renaissance concern with logic and proportions, artists usually depicted Christ lying at the Virgin's feet, with only his head propped against her knees.³⁶ Traditionally, the pieta shows the five wounds on Jesus' body as described in the biblical story of his crucifixion³⁷, including his hands, feet, and chest. It was also typical for blood to be represented on his body to show his true suffering,³⁸ for scars to be on his forehead where the crown of thorns was placed on his head, and for his knees to be scrapped from when he fell while carrying the cross.³⁹ In the 13th and 14th century, Christian art placed strong emphasis on Mary, as she was often linked to the Passion of Christ and his suffering on the cross. Mary's grief in such images is apparent, often dramatically, but she is intended to

³⁵Joanna Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pieta," accessed November 24, 2018, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.holycross.edu:2048/eds/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=335f2ff7-d477-470f-ae0-0e38a3d4a3cd%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=87324352&db=ers>

³⁶"Pieta," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pieta-iconography>

³⁷Joanna Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pieta," accessed November 24, 2018, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.holycross.edu:2048/eds/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=335f2ff7-d477-470f-ae0-0e38a3d4a3cd%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=87324352&db=ers>

³⁸Richard Stracke, "The Lamentation and the Pieta," last modified September 10 2016, <http://www.christianiconography.info/lamentation.html>

³⁹Joanna Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pieta," accessed November 24, 2018, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.holycross.edu:2048/eds/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=335f2ff7-d477-470f-ae0-0e38a3d4a3cd%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=87324352&db=ers>

represent the power of faith, serving as a symbol of mercy and love, despite humanity's culpability in the death of her son.⁴⁰

Additionally, sculptural images of the pieta are often triangular in shape, with Jesus's head off to the side. These depictions show Mary sitting, cradling the body of Jesus. Mary is often heavily draped in robes that disguise her figure and flow around her. Often, the physical forms of Mary and Jesus are not proportional, with Mary carved as a comparatively larger figure, which was likely done so that she could be shown as gracefully supporting Jesus on her lap without losing the overall structural balance of the sculpture.⁴¹

Because of Mary's evident grief and her son's cruel suffering, the pieta is usually regarded as an intimate presentation of the vulnerability of both Jesus and Mary. Contrastingly, Michelangelo elected to depict Mary as a young woman to emphasize her elegance, beauty, and purity as a holy virgin. Michelangelo similarly chose to deemphasize Jesus's wounds and instead highlight the inherent tragedy and sacrifice of the moment by presenting it as a scene of intense serenity and motherly devotion.⁴² Although religious art suffered a decline after the 17th century, the pieta continued to be a vital theme through the 19th century because of its special emotional appeal.⁴³

⁴⁰ibid.

⁴¹ibid.

⁴²Joanna Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pieta," accessed November 24, 2018, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.holycross.edu:2048/eds/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=335f2ff7-d477-470f-ae0-0e38a3d4a3cd%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=87324352&db=ers>

⁴³"Pieta," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pieta-iconography>

In the traditional style, the suffering and pain and Christ was clearly apparent in the pieta style-- why then did Michelangelo stray from this norm? Only a small number of these works made their way to Italy, and they often were distinguished by an expressive, somewhat crude realism that lent very direct expression to suffering and grief.⁴⁴ Although the real answer is unknown, we can be sure that Michelangelo's beautiful representation of a scene so gory expresses ways to cope with pain, crafting the idea of what it means to "suffer well."

Michelangelo's Pieta

Created in 1498, *La Pieta*, serves as Michelangelo's first sculptural masterpiece, changing the way the world saw art through its precision, texture, and uncompromising beauty. Commissioned by a French cardinal as a tomb monument, the sculpture depicts Mary cradling the dead body of Christ after he is taken down from the Cross. The *Pieta* conveys, in visual elements, the connection between the Incarnation (Christ made flesh) and the Oblation (Sacrifice of Christ).⁴⁵ The marble used to create the *Pieta* is said to have been the "most perfect" block Michelangelo has ever used, as the artist envisioned his statue as "already existing within the marble, needing only to be 'set free' from it."⁴⁶ Giorgio Vasari, a great Italian painter and historian known for his biographies of famous artists, is heard to have said the following of the *Pieta*:

Among the many beautiful features (including the inspired garments) this is notably demonstrated by the

⁴⁴Frank Zollner, *Michelangelo* (Hong Kong, 2007)

⁴⁵ibid.

⁴⁶"La Pieta," Vescovo Buonarroti Art LLC, accessed September 23 2018. <http://lapieta.com/la-pieta.aspx>.

body of Christ itself. It would be impossible to find a body showing greater mastery of art and possessing more beautiful members, or a nude with more detail in the muscles, veins and nerves stretched over their framework of bones, or a more deathly corpse.

The beauty as expressed by Vasari, the exuberance of details, and the simplicity⁴⁷ of *La Pietà* do not go unnoticed by its viewer, which is something that sets it apart from the traditional style.

Although depicting a single moment in time, the finesse of Michelangelo's sculpture heightens the emotion of the image and adds to its breathtaking aesthetic. The smoothness of the lines and angles contrast with earlier sculptures of the *pietà*, and adds an element of grace and softness to the sculpture. The gentleness of the marble work distracts the viewer from the truth of the gory scene; the viewer instead feels a sense of ease and peacefulness upon looking at the relaxed states of Jesus and Mary. The direct expression of grief and suffering typical to the traditional style is transformed in an ideal aesthetic, intended to move its viewer less through the experience of physical and emotional pain and more through its artistically fashioned beauty.⁴⁸

Jesus' body is lifeless, craving support from his mother's. His head is rested against Mary's shoulder, and the lower half of his body is supported in her arms. It is evident that Jesus is supported by Mary's body, but his body is depicted in different ways from the traditional style. For example, his head is gently rested on the back side of Mary's arm, and it is held in close to her body. Jesus' head does not jut out of the sculpture's frame as it did in earlier *pietas*, creating a soft and peaceful quality to the sculpture.

⁴⁷Johannes Wilde, "Michelangelo" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978)

⁴⁸Frank Zollner, *Michelangelo* (Hong Kong, 2007)

As seen in traditional pietas, Mary looks down upon Jesus, directing the viewer's eyes to his crucified body. Although the viewer knows Jesus *should* have wounds on his body, we are somehow distracted by other elements of the sculpture where this lacking of reality does not seem to bother us. Immediately, there are no evident wounds on Jesus's body aside from a small marking on his right hand [*figure 6*]; the viewer is not drawn to his suffering. In fact, Jesus's body looks almost perfect, which is heightened through the light reflection off of the marble, creating a moment too good to be true, especially considering the real story behind the image.

A close examination of each figure reveals that their proportions are not natural in relation to each other. Although their heads are proportionate, Mary's body is much larger than Jesus'; she appears so large that if she were to stand up she would likely tower over her son. The viewer does not get a sense of Mary's size from her physical body, but rather her clothing. The weight of Jesus convinces the viewer of Mary's strength, but the deep folds and drapery of her clothing make her physical body appear large. Studies suggest that Mary's unrealistic size serves to better the gracefulness of the sculpture, as a smaller Mary would have looked very awkward and uncomfortable holding an adult male.⁴⁹ The sturdiness of Mary's body contrasts her normal sized head and her delicate features, which the viewer is immediately drawn to amidst the harshness of pity and loss. Adding to this is Mary's unusual youthfulness, which is to be explained through the tradition of the Virgin holding her dead son, thinking back to the days in Bethlehem when he was a baby in her arms, dreaming that he has merely fallen asleep.⁵⁰

⁴⁹“Michelangelo's Pieta,” Analysis of the Art of Renaissance Italian, accessed September 23 2018.
<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-pieta/>

⁵⁰Howard Hubbard, “Michelangelo” (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974)

Although Mary and Jesus are not physically representative of a mother and son, both retain a sweet tenderness despite the tragic nature of the scene. At this moment, Mary is confronted with the reality of her son's death, in which upon utter sadness and devastation, she remains grateful and appears accepting of the reality. This sense of peace is heightened when examining the body of Jesus. Instead of being depicted as bloody and bruised after hours of torture, Christ is depicted as if he is in a peaceful slumber. Despite their suffering in different ways, Mary and Jesus are portrayed in a beautiful, idealized image, echoing the beauty of the divine.⁵¹

The divinity expressed in *La Pietà* is also evident in the artists' use of space and triangular shapes,⁵² aligning with Christianity's idea of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The sculpture itself is a triangular shape, with Mary's head as the top point, and the corners of her clothing are the two bottom points. It is much more of a complete triangle than in the traditional pietas, suggesting a more unified image. Hidden in the sculpture are smaller triangles, such as the one created by Mary's head and her hands, and the one created by her head and shoulders. Christ's body also serves as an inverted triangle, with his torso as the bottom point, and his head and knees as the two top points. The recurrence of triangular shapes makes for a more coherent image, with the eye following the same shapes throughout. There are no other jarring lines or shapes which interrupt the viewer's ease of scanning the sculpture.

Although Michelangelo uses linearization to create triangles, he also uses it throughout his sculpture to add depth and weight to his piece. Evidently, Mary's clothing has the deepest

⁵¹"Michelangelo's Pietà," Analysis of the Art of Renaissance Italian.

⁵²"Pietà," Artble, accessed September 23 2018, <https://www.artble.com/artists/michelangelo/sculpture/pieta>

lineage, with the overlapping folds of her dress. In more subtle ways, Michelangelo uses lines to depict a sense of motion. For example, Christ's body itself is twisted, and the flow of his clothing and the clothing of Mary's upper body emphasizes this movement. Interestingly, the sculpture itself is immobile, but the manipulation of linearization Michelangelo employs brings *La Pieta* to life. The motion Michelangelo creates is slow and soft, allowing the viewer to feel at ease and peace upon admiring the sculpture. The viewer's attention is directed towards the serenity and beauty of the image, rather than the gory realization of Christ's body.

Through his wonderful craftsmanship and portrayal of peace, Michelangelo's *Pieta* offers a sense of hope for its viewer. Jesus, who has endured one of the most painful experiences known to man, has suffered beautifully; his portrayal emphasizes his transcendence into heaven.

Through Jesus's suffering on the cross came hope and opportunity for all mankind. Jesus' death has been accepted by his mother, the Virgin Mary, suggesting that we too should accept our pain and suffering just as she did. The overwhelming serenity of the *Pieta* suggests the modern term, "there is always light at the end of the tunnel." There is meaningfulness in pain and suffering, and this can be dealt with in ways modern painkillers cannot achieve; Michelangelo's sculpture provides an emotional outlet and positive state of mind that the physical pain relief of painkillers cannot.

Ironically, Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece achieves this same effect on its viewer, although through a much more gory image. The altarpiece challenges its viewer through its depiction of the reality of suffering, and makes them question how "good" can come out of it.

Grunewald's Altarpiece

Built shortly after Michelangelo's *Pieta*, the Isenheim Altarpiece [figure 2] was completed in 1516, which Grunewald was entrusted with in 1515, serving as the largest and most important commission of his career. This piece was commissioned by Italian knight, Guido Guersi, who asked the artist to paint a series of wings for the shrine of the high altar in the Antonite monastery at Isenheim. The subject matter of the wings was based largely on the text of the popular, mystical *Revelations* of St. Bridget of Sweden (written about 1370). The altarpiece became to be known as the single most important work of German Renaissance paintings.⁵³

The Isenheim Altarpiece was created to serve as the central object of devotion in an Isenheim hospital built by the Brothers of St. Anthony, who was a patron saint of those suffering from skin diseases. Today, the altarpiece no longer serves this purpose, but instead is held at the Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar, Alsace, and was broken up from its original polyptych form shortly after the French Revolution.⁵⁴ During its original use at the Isenheim hospital, the Antonine monks devoted themselves to the care of sick and dying peasants, many of whom suffered from the effects of ergotism, a disease caused by consuming rye grain infected with fungus, which causes hallucinations, skin infections and attacks on the central nervous system, eventually leading to death.⁵⁵ More recently in the early 20th century, the altarpiece was brought to Munich, Germany during a time of great pilgrimage, and special tours were given of the altarpiece to those coming

⁵³Christiane Andersson, "Grunewald, Matthias," Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000035179?&mediaType=Article>

⁵⁴Ann Stieglitz, "The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece after the First World War," *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 2 (1989): 89

⁵⁵"Matthias Grunewald," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthias-Grunewald>

into town, the working class, and soldiers. The altar's presence bore witness to the suffering of Germany's people.⁵⁶

With the exception of Holy Days, the wings of the Isenheim Altarpiece are typically kept closed, forcing the patients to be confronted with Christ's death almost daily. The closed altarpiece displayed two scenes of the Crucifixion, both involving saints known to protect and heal the sick-- the one on the left by the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows, and that on the right by Saint Anthony the Great, who remained unphased although he is being taunted by a monster. These Crucifixions stand as some of the most poignant representations of this scene in Western art because of the artist's depiction of horrific agony, with Christ's emaciated body writhing under the pain of the nails driven through his hands and feet.⁵⁷ Christ's body is covered with sores and riddled, leaving no doubt of his suffering [figure 7, 8]. The real depiction of Christ's suffering evoked the Christian message of his horrible death, providing comfort in the patients communion because they visibly share in Christ's pain. The size of Christ allows for this sense of comfort to be easily achieved, as Grunewald depicted the Crucifixion scene across two panels, depicting Christ to be life-sized. This realistic representation allows for the viewer to feel as if Christ is in the space with them, and as if they are facing a real person.

The distorted Christ, as what Grunewald visioned to be an image from hell on earth, is sprawled across the Cross showing clear signs of physical puncture; his skin is shriveled, bloody, and spotted with pox. Additionally, instruments of pain such as a crown of thorns, nails, and cross are

⁵⁶ Ann Stieglitz, "The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece after the First World War," *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 2 (1989): 89

⁵⁷"Isenheim Altarpiece," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece

included in the scene. Although this work is not a *peita*, it mimics the traditional style in the sense it portrays the wounds and true suffering of Christ. On the left hand side, the Virgin Mary is held by Saint John the Evangelist in agony over her dead son's body. On the right hand side, Saint John the Baptist gestures towards Christ's suffering body while holding a scroll which reads: "he must increase, but I must decrease."

Both figures on the side of the central panel exhibit reactions to the horrific state of Christ's body, making his suffering the focal point of the altarpiece, drawing the viewer's attention immediately to it. The image of suffering is present throughout the entire altarpiece in not only the largest panel, but also in the bottom section [*figure 9*], literally providing a foundation for the rest of the work. The bottom of the altarpiece depicts the Lamentation, in which Christ's dead body is taken down from the Cross and layed down for all to mourn. Here again we see the punctures of his body and the blood and fragility of his bones and drooping skin. The horrific images of the suffering Christ invite its viewers, especially the hospital patients, into the reality of mortality and resurrection. In fact, it is said that Christ's suffering body was meant to act as a denizen of the hospital, making the patient's suffering visible through visual representation.⁵⁸ For suffering patients, this image provides a sense of hope. Similar to Michelangelo's *Pieta*, the viewer understands the good that came out of Christ's death, although it was torturous in the moment. The image of the suffering Christ reminds the patients that there will be hope at the end of their journey, just as there was for Jesus. Meaning can then be ascribed to personal suffering, providing a coping mechanism that painkillers could not achieve.

⁵⁸“Grunewald, Isenheim Altarpiece,” Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/early-europe-and-colonial-americas/renaissance-art-europe-ap/a/grnewald-isenheim-altarpiece>

The viewer then is challenged to think about how this piece can still provide hope in suffering while being confronted with the real harshness of pain and suffering; we are faced with the note of agony rather than peace, and of “gothic pain” rather than “classical harmony”⁵⁹ as we see in Michelangelo’s piece. The lacerated body of Christ is too noticeable to be ignored, but the viewers physical closeness to him makes him relatable; we in turn see humanity in suffering. We are confronted with the idea that the human feels pain in its most vulnerable state, which is the only way we can truly feel love.

Grunewald’s altarpiece offers a similar sense of pain relief found in Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. Both works of art were made to be looked at, and were made to be in places people often went to for spiritual healing, whether that be through expressing their faith, praying, or asking for forgiveness. Like the *Pieta*, the Isenheim altarpiece evokes an emotional response to the idea of pain and suffering, although through its harsh portrayal of suffering rather than the glorified image of it. However, Grunewald challenges his viewer to think about how understanding the reality of suffering provides peace and comfort, while Michelangelo challenges his viewer to think about how there can be such peace and comfort in pain.

The Idea of Suffering Well

Michelangelo’s and Grunewald’s works of art were produced in the context of not using painkillers, so they serve a role in dealing with suffering and are important to think about in

⁵⁹Ann Stieglitz, “The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grunewald’s Isenheim Altar after the First World War,” *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 2 (1989): 89

terms of how they were used, and can still be used today, as coping mechanisms. Because this is very different from our contemporary experience of pain, these works make us question what it means to “suffer well” and how this modern term was unconsciously in effect in the times of Michelangelo and Grunewald.

Catholic priest and philosopher,⁶⁰ Ivan Illich is a highly regarded author who closely studied the expropriation of health and expanded on the modern idea of suffering, contributing to the idea of what it means to “suffer well.” In his book “Medical Nemesis” written in 1976, Illich analyzes the modern emphasis and need of killing pain. The experience of pain, he writes, is not from physical painful sensations, but from the uniquely human performance called “suffering.”⁶¹ However, westernized medicine has turned pain into a technical matter, depriving suffering of its inherent personal meaning. Ivan notes:

Traditional cultures confront pain, impairment, and death by interpreting them as challenges soliciting a response from the individual under stress; medical civilization turns them into demands made by individuals on the economy, into problems that can be managed or *produced* out of existence.^{62 63}

The human emotion behind pain and suffering, as seen in the *Pieta* and Isenheim Altarpiece, have been taken out of modern ways of coping with and thinking about pain. Illich suggests that people no longer look towards inward meanings of suffering, but instead look towards outward

⁶⁰Ivan Illich, “A Brief Biography of Ivan Illich,” *SAGE JOURNALS Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467696016005-602>

⁶¹Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (United States: Random House, Inc., 1976), 133

⁶²ibid.

⁶³Thomas S. Szasz, *Pain and Pleasure* (New York: Basic Books, 1957)

cultures and society to interpret their pain;⁶⁴ people no longer feel the need to take responsibility for their performance under the impact of bodily harm or grief. The medicalization of pain and the detachment it provides from natural bodily experiences banishes the early idea that “people had to deal on their own”⁶⁵; pain has ceased to be conceived as a “natural” or “metaphysical.”

Pain and suffering have become judgeable in modern society-- by doctors, ourselves, and others in society. Pain has become, what it seems to be, the only part of human suffering over which the medical profession has control.⁶⁶ However, the personal performance of suffering espaces such experimental and calculated control, and is thus neglected in the experience of pain.⁶⁷ Because our society has become so reliant on the medicalization of pain through the prescription of and dependence on painkillers, we often forget other coping, pain-relief mechanisms that are associated with the experience of suffering.

Because pain-killing was not common in the time of Michelangelo and Grunewald, “pain” was perceived as something different. As Illich explains:

For the Christian, it [pain] was the loss of original integrity produced by Adam’s sin. All of them [European religions] saw pain as the bitter taste of cosmic evil, the manifestation of nature’s weakness, of a diabolical will, or of a well-deserved divine curse. Each person was born with the call to learn to live in a vale of pain. People were able to stand up in heroic defiance or stoically deny the need for alleviation; they could welcome the opportunity for purification, penance, or sacrifice, and reluctantly tolerate the inevitable while

⁶⁴Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (United States: Random House, Inc., 1976), 134

⁶⁵Victor Weiszaecker, “Zum Begriff der Arbeit: Eine Habeas-Corpus Akte der Medizin?” (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1948), 707-61

⁶⁶ Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (United States: Random House, Inc., 1976), 134

⁶⁷ A Soullairac, J. Cahn, and J. Charpentier, *Pain* (New York: Academic Press, 1968) 119-230

seeking to relieve it. Pain was man's experience of a marred universe...a sign of corruption in nature...and an experience of the soul. Pain was reduced to a useful learning device.⁶⁸

Both artists' religious works suggested the vale of pain that was thought to be lived in by all. For Michelangelo, the beautiful and graceful depiction of suffering suggests the heroic defiance and opportunity for purification and hope Illich mentions. For Grunewald, the realistic and gory depiction of suffering suggests the divine curse and presence of pain in *everyone's* lives Illich mentions.

With the introduction of painkillers, it now seems rational to flee pain rather than face it. However, with rising levels of induced sensitivity to pain, the capacity to experience the simple joys of life has equally declined.⁶⁹ Today, the reminder that suffering is a responsible activity that requires personal participation is almost unbearable to those in our society because we have become so reliant on turning to drugs for immediate pain relief. However, through the works of Michelangelo and Grunewald, we are reminded of this responsibility we owe to ourselves. The technique and effort required in examining these works of art must be applied to the "study" of ourselves in pain. Pain-killing turns people into feelings of unfeeling spectators of their own decaying selves.⁷⁰

This leads us to think, how then are we supposed to suffer? If modern medicine techniques have stripped us of our natural ways and responsibility of suffering, how *should* we suffer in an era

⁶⁸Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (United States: Random House, Inc., 1976), 148-151

⁶⁹*ibid.* pp. 152

⁷⁰Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (United States: Random House, Inc., 1976), 153-154

that strongly emphasizes only the physicality of pain? According to Illich, suffering, and thus dying, is a “craft” in the sense that it is something we make through creative training, struggling, and formation.⁷¹ Pain finds a special meaning within this “craft”, which can be made well if we take on personal responsibility in the context of our suffering.

For Illich, our experience of pain is shaped into four factors: culture, anxiety, attention, and interpretation⁷²; personal responsibility can be intertwined throughout all of these. Works of art such as the *Pieta* and Isenheim Altarpiece connect their viewers to the cultural religious rationale for pain, and when interpreted, can relieve anxiety and can focus their attention on their own suffering and the good that can come out of it. However, in order to “suffer well,” one must consider all of Illich’s four factors, compromising their personal responsibility in their experience of suffering.

The image of suffering Christ provides an example on which behavior in pain could be modeled. Michelangelo’s and Grunewald’s images of Christ, although very different in composition, encourage their viewer to focus on the human experience of pain and their individual responsibility in lessening their own suffering. Just as Christ took the responsibility of giving up his life for the rest of mankind, those suffering must partake in similar personal responsibility to “suffer well.” Although to different extremes, everyone has the ability to make their suffering a

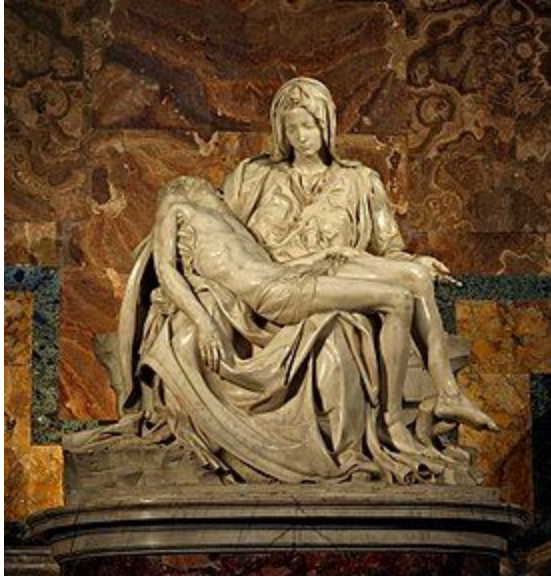
⁷¹Dr. Ephraim Radner, “The Craft of Suffering,” last edited February 15, 2017, <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2017/02/15/the-craft-of-suffering/>

⁷²Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (United States: Random House, Inc., 1976)

“craft” through the responsibility of shaping their experience, a quality that physical pain killers do not have the ability to do.

The *Pieta* and Isenheim Altarpiece, although through different forms, suggest ways of coping with pain, relating back to Illich’s argument of personal responsibility in the experience of suffering. Michelangelo’s gracefulness of suffering and Grunewald’s realistic depiction of physical suffering, offer ways of coping different from modern methods that rely heavily on painkillers and medical means to reduce pain. The peacefulness and magnificence of the *Pieta* suggests the hopefulness and offers a sense of oneness with Christ, underlying a meaning of suffering that one must feel in order to “suffer well.” Similarly, the Isenheim Altarpiece suggests the physical reality of suffering, but also connects the viewer with Christ, encouraging them to think of this same larger meaning and hopefulness associated with suffering that one must have to “suffer well.”

Figure 1



Pieta

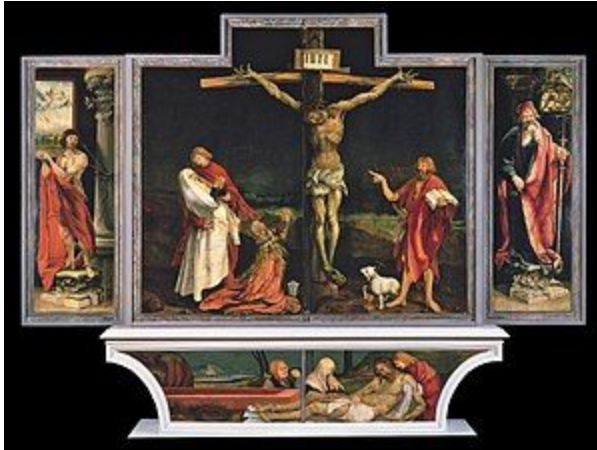
Michelangelo Buonarroti

1498-1499

St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy

Marble, 5'9" by 6'5"

Figure 2



Isenheim Altarpiece

Matthias Grunewald

1516

Monastery of St. Anthony, Isenheim, Germany

Oil on wood, around 9' high by around 10' wide

Figure 3



Röttgen Pietà

1300-25

Germany

Wood, paint

34-1/2 inches tall

Figure 4



Pieta

1400

Munich, Germany

75 cm tall

Figure 5



Pieta

1435-1440

Swabia, Germany

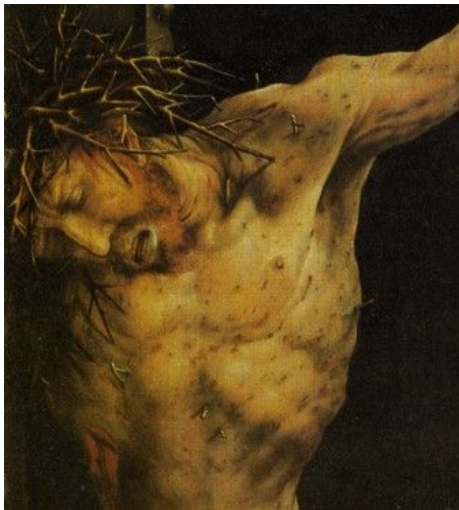
Wood, paint, gilt
35 inches tall

Figure 6



Close Up of Hand of Christ
Pieta
Michelangelo Buonarroti
1498-1499

Figures 7, 8



Isenheim Altarpiece

Matthias Grunewald
1516
Oil painting on panel

Figure 9



Isenheim Altarpiece Lamentation Scene
Matthias Grunewald
1516
Oil painting on panel

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