

Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts,
London in partnership with Royal Collection Trust
and with the collaboration of Bill Viola Studio

Teacher Resource
For teaching
Key Stages 3–5

Work in focus from the RA Collection

Michelangelo's 'Taddei Tondo'



Featured in
Bill Viola/Michelangelo
Life, Death, Rebirth

Royal Academy of Arts
Until 31 March 2019

roy.ac/teachers

Email studentgroups@royalacademy.org.uk
or call 020 7300 5995
to book your visit

RA

Your visit

Please note that this exhibition has low light levels.

Some works have flashing lights, and others contain nudity. *Nantes Triptych* contains graphic scenes that some visitors may find upsetting.

We are offering primary and secondary groups self-directed visits for this exhibition. Due to content, it may not be suitable for KS1 or KS2.

 To find out more take a look at the **Teachers and Schools** section on our website.

Introduction

This teacher resource focuses on Michelangelo's *The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John*, known as the 'Taddei Tondo', from the RA Collection. By focusing on this one work whilst it features in *Bill Viola/Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth* students are encouraged to use it as a springboard to explore the rest of the exhibition and to compare and contrast this 'work in focus' with Bill Viola's video works and Michelangelo's drawings.

This exhibition brings together two artists – born centuries apart – who explore the same universal themes with works of transcendent beauty and raw emotional power.

In contrast to the scale and grandeur of his frescoes and sculptures, Michelangelo's exquisite drawings take us closer to the emotional core of his work. Finished works in their own right, they were created as gifts and expressions of love, or as private and meditative reflections on his own mortality.

In 2006, pioneering video artist Bill Viola saw the finest of a collection of these drawings at Windsor Castle, and was astonished by the Renaissance master's expressive use of the body to convey emotional and spiritual states. Although created in a radically different medium, Viola's own works also grapple with life's fundamental questions, asking us to consider the thresholds between birth, life and death. Both artists harness the symbolic power of sacred art, and both show us physical extremes and moments of transcendence.

This exhibition explores the affinities between Bill Viola and Michelangelo and is conceived as an immersive journey through the cycle of life.





Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John (the 'Taddei Tondo'), c. 1504–05

Room 2 of the Exhibition

Marble relief, diameter 106.8 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London. Bequeathed by Sir George Beaumont, 1830. © Royal Academy of Arts, London;
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Limited

'Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.'

'By sculpture I understand that which is done by the sheer force of taking away; that which is done by addition is similar to painting.'

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Who is the artist?

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), better known as Michelangelo, was an Italian artist celebrated as the greatest practitioner of the three visual arts of sculpture, painting and architecture. Although he considered himself primarily a sculptor, he is probably best known for his painted ceilings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. He was one of the chief creators of High Renaissance art, and his fame during his own lifetime was unprecedented.

Michelangelo's artwork is still celebrated over 400 years since his death. He became well known in Britain through various collections of his drawings, and the arrival of the 'Taddei Tondo' at the RA in the 19th century was important as it provided an example of his sculpture which RA Schools students could study.

What is the artwork?

The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John, known as the 'Taddei Tondo', is the only marble sculpture by Michelangelo in Great Britain. It is a circular marble relief featuring the infant St. John the Baptist on the left holding his baptism bowl and the infant Christ on the right held by his mother, the Virgin Mary. St John presents a bird to Christ symbolising his future. It is most likely a goldfinch which is said to have taken a thorn from Christ's crown during the period immediately before his Crucifixion.

The marble is thought to have been carved between 1504 and 1505 during the artist's first period in Florence. At this time, he executed two other circular compositions, a painting and a marble relief, both of which can be seen in Florence. There is a great debate as to why the 'Taddei Tondo' is unfinished. Either it is because he was very busy at this time, or there was concern of it breaking, or it was not completed due to creative frustration.

The sculpture got its nickname from its previous owner, the wealthy cloth merchant and connoisseur Taddeo Taddei. 'Tondo' refers to its shape, as tondo comes from the Italian word for round – *rotondo*, and this was a common term for a round painting or sculpture at the time. It was probably originally intended for a domestic setting and stayed in Taddei's home in Florence until the early 19th century. In 1822, the 'Tondo' was bought by Sir George Beaumont, a collector and amateur painter, who left his works of art to the nation. The 'Tondo' was given to the Royal Academy following Lady Margaret Beaumont's death in 1829. Within a week of the artwork being at the Royal Academy, John Constable – who had just been elected a Royal Academician – declared it "one of the most beautiful works of art in existence".

Questions

What was the relationship between St John the Baptist and Christ in the Bible? Look at the infant Christ's position. Do you think he is leaning in towards his mother in fear of John and the bird, or is he playing games with the goldfinch who was a common pet at this time?

The 'Taddei Tondo' is unfinished. Look at this sculpture – either in the exhibition *Bill Viola / Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth*, or at a photograph of it. Which parts seem smooth and which parts look rough? Which is the most unfinished figure? Why do you think this is the case?

Many representations of the Virgin and Child in art signify that our eventual death is part of our lives from the moment of birth. In the exhibition *Bill Viola / Michelangelo: Life, Death, Rebirth*, watch and find out more about Bill Viola's video works on this theme; in particular *The Messenger*, 1996 (Room 1) and *Nantes Triptych*, 1992 (Room 2). What are the similarities to the 'Taddei Tondo' and these artworks? What are the differences? Although created in different mediums and centuries apart, they both explore life's fundamental questions, asking us to consider the thresholds between birth, life and death.

Take a look around the whole exhibition. Which artworks do you like the best and why? Are you drawn more to the large immersive video works by Viola, or the small intimate drawings by Michelangelo? Can you find any other connections between Viola's and Michelangelo's artworks in this exhibition?

The 'Taddei Tondo' is part of the RA Collection. What other artworks in the RA Collection are by Michelangelo?

Key words list

Marble

Relief

Tondo

Christ

St John

Virgin


Goldfinch

Birth


Life

Death

Useful links

 **Use the RA's online Collection Explorer as a research tool to find out more** (scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on the links to related artworks). You can also see sketches here of the 'Taddei Tondo' by John Constable RA and Sir David Wilkie RA.

 **John Constable RA (1776–1837)**
Sketch of Michelangelo's Taddei Tondo, 1st July 1830

 **Sir David Wilkie RA (1785–1841)**
Sketch of Michelangelo's Taddei tondo, c.1823?

Please note that if you are unable to visit the exhibition there are clips of both Bill Viola's videos (Nantes Triptych and The Messenger) available to watch on YouTube.

Bill Viola

Nantes Triptych, 1992

Room 2 of the Exhibition

Video/sound installation. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio
Photo: Kira Perov



Art activities for the classroom

Title

Birth, Life and Death

Work of art

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John (the 'Taddei Tondo'), c. 1504–05

Related themes

and curriculum links

Art & Design

Using a range of techniques and media, increasing students' proficiency in the handling of different materials, recording their observations in sketchbooks, and analysing and evaluating their work and that of others.

Exam themes

Human body, messages, texture.

Activity outline

Choose one of the themes of birth, life and death to inspire a relief sculpture. Make a list of words associated with your theme. Sketch out your relief in your sketchbook. What shape will it be? Round like the 'Taddei Tondo', or another shape? How will you make it represent your theme? Will it be abstract or figurative – perhaps including a face?

Use polystyrene, plastic face forms, cardboard scraps and masking tape to create the main structure of your relief. Use craft knives to carve ridges, or cut holes in the foam. Create shapes and add them to build up your relief. Think about how you are going to present your work by adding small holes at the top to hang it from.

Once your basic shape has been made, take the plaster gauze, cut it into strips and dip it into water before draping it across the surface of your relief. Make sure you wrap around the edges for a neat finish. You will then need to leave it to dry.

Once it has dried, paint it white to unify the colour and fill in any small holes in the plaster gauze. You could also cut key words from magazines or newspapers which match your theme and stick these onto your relief, or print your own words out if you cannot find what you want. Once dry, cover the whole relief in a layer of PVA glue to make it shiny like marble. Leave your finished relief until it is completely dry.

Finally hang up your work on the classroom wall using fishing line. Ask your classmates to critique your work. Can they tell whether your chosen theme was birth, life or death?

 See examples of relief works by Year 9 students

Resources and materials

Sketchbook
Pencils
Plastic face forms / masks
Polystyrene foam (sheets or from packing materials)
Cardboard scraps
Masking tape
Craft knives
Plaster gauze
Pots for water
White paint (house paint)
Paintbrushes
Magazines / newspapers
Scissors
PVA glue
Fishing line

Learning outcomes

Create a sculptural relief whilst experimenting in different media.

Extension for KS4/5

Inspired by Bill Viola's *Nantes Triptych*, 1992, can you extend your work to become a triptych representing all three of the themes? What is a triptych and where were they originally seen? How are traditional triptychs different to Viola's triptych? How will your triptych be presented?

Rather than choosing birth, life and death, you might like to focus on life, death and rebirth which is the title of the exhibition. 'Rebirth' is the process of being reincarnated or born again.

Further research

Bill Viola is an American contemporary video artist whose work grapples with life's fundamental questions, asking us to consider the thresholds between birth, life and death.

Examples of his video work include

 *Nantes Triptych*, 1992

 *The Messenger*, 1996

Links

Teachers and Schools on the RA website

www.royalacademy.org.uk/teachers-and-schools

Collections Explorer – The Tondo

www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/the-virgin-and-child-with-the-infant-st-john

Sketch of Michelangelo's Taddei Tondo, 1st July 1830

John Constable RA (1776 - 1837)

www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/sketch-of-michelangelos-taddei-tondo-1

Sketch of Michelangelo's Taddei tondo, c. 1823?

Sir David Wilkie RA (1785 - 1841)

www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/sketch-of-michelangelos-taddei-tondo

See examples of relief works by Year 9 students

https://ms084.k12.sd.us/new_page_15.htm

Bill Viola, *Nantes Triptych*, 1992

www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/viola-nantes-triptych-t06854

Bill Viola, *The Messenger*, 1996

www.guggenheim.org/artwork/4390

How to read it: Michelangelo's 'Taddei Tondo'

www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/how-to-read-it-michelangelo-taddei-tondo

Writer

Rachel Moss

Editor

Zoë Smith

The 'Taddei Tondo' will be returned to the RA Collection Gallery from April 2019.



**Coming soon: our RA
Collection Teachers
Resource for Key
Stages 3–5**

Cover image

Michelangelo Buonarroti
The Virgin and Child with the Infant St John (the
'Taddei Tondo'), c. 1504–05.

Marble relief, diameter 106.8 cm. Royal Academy of
Arts, London. Bequeathed by Sir George Beaumont,
1830. © Royal Academy of Arts, London; Photo:
Prudence Cuming Associates Limited