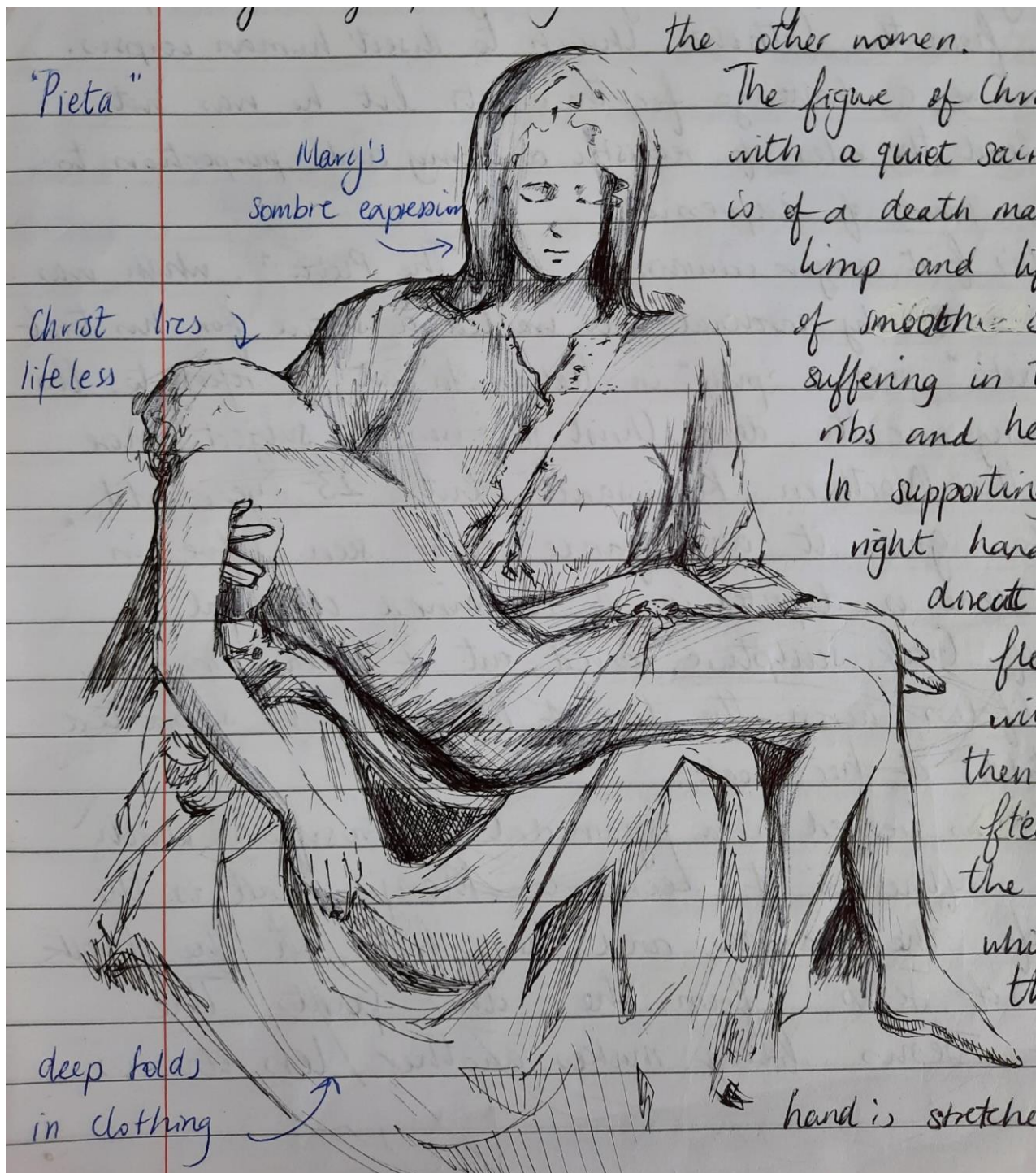


## 2009 Higher Level Question 11

Michelangelo was a painter, sculptor, and architect; however, he considered himself a sculptor at the foremost. At the age of 13, he was apprenticed to Ghirlandaio and learned the basics of painting and design. Later he joined the Medici court and learned the technique of sculpture by copying the classical statues in the gardens. He also drew inspiration from the life and work of the artists before him such as Giotto, Donatello, and Masaccio. The Medici court was full of Philosophers and artists of the time who were Neo-Platonists. Michelangelo became very interested in the beliefs of the Neo-Platonists who believed that beauty was divine and that all beauty could be seen in the human body. He studied anatomy intently and obtained special permission from the Catholic Church to dissect human corpses. Difficult poses were a challenge for the artists, but he was not afraid to bend the rules of realistic anatomy and proportion to increase the power of expression.

### The Pieta

Michelangelo's first major Commission was "The Pieta", which was made for an elderly cardinal who wanted a statue for his tomb. The word "pieta" means "pity" in Italian. In art, it refers to the Virgin grieving over the dead Christ. It was a subject more typical of the Northern Renaissance, but 23-year-old Michelangelo gave it an elegance never seen before in Italy. The scene is depicted in a restrained classical manner of Greek sculpture, carved out of Carrara marble. Christ lies lifeless across the lap of Mary and is supported by the folds of her cloak.



The sculpture is created in a pyramidal composition which shows the influence of Leonardo. Mary's head is the pinnacle of the triangle and her foot on the block and those of Jesus from the other points. The position of Jesus's body makes another less obvious triangle, inverted inside the main one. It creates a harmonious symmetry and draws the eye to the Virgin's face and downcast eyes. The grieving mother is serene and accepting and the realistic figures have gone beyond the human to the divine, Mary's youthful, idealized beauty suggests spiritual purity. Around the time the work was finished, there was a complaint against Michelangelo because of the way he depicted the Virgin. She appears so young, that she could scarcely be the mother of a thirty-three-

year-old son. Michelangelo's answer to this criticism was simply that women who are chaste retain their beauty longer, meaning that the Virgin would not have aged like the other women.

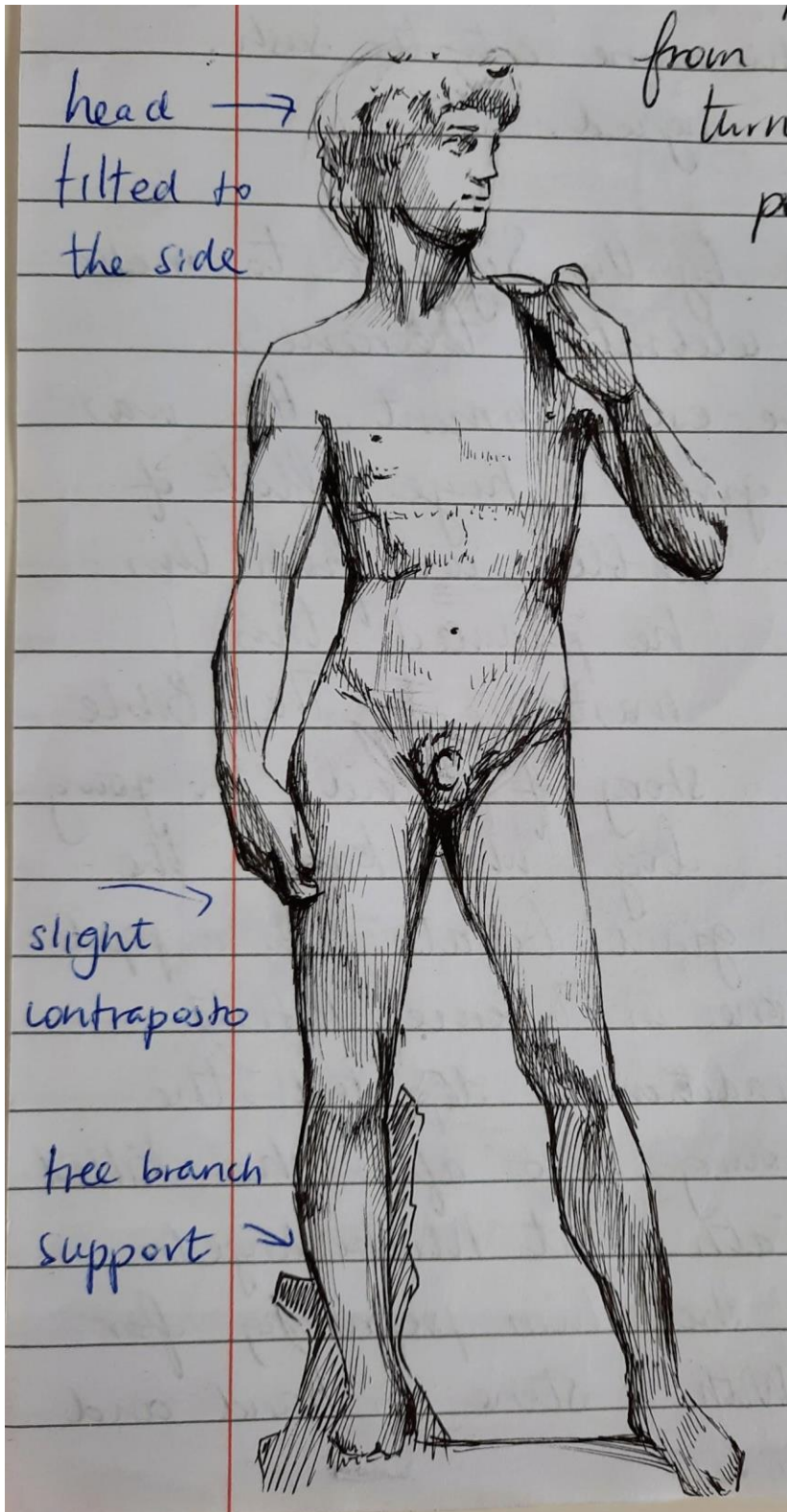
The figure of Christ is also depicted with a quiet sacredness. His face is a death mask and body limp and lifeless. The expanse of smooth skin exposes his suffering in the form of taunt ribs and heavy limbs. In supporting Christ, Mary's right hand does not come into direct contact with his flesh but is covered with a cloth which then presses into Christ's flesh. This enhances the weight of the body while also signifying the sacredness of his body. Her other hand is stretched out, open in acceptance.

One of the technical difficulties Michelangelo overcame was successfully depicting a grown man stretched over the lap of a seated woman. His solution was to build support with elegant folds of cloth and amassed the garments on her lap into a sea of folded drapery to make her look larger. While this drapery serves this practical purpose, it also allowed him to display his ability to drill and cut deeply into marble. The marble looks less like stone and more like actual cloth because of its multiplicity of natural-looking folds, curves, and deep recesses.

The Pieta became exceedingly famous right after it was unveiled. Some artists could not accept that so young an artist could produce such an accomplished work and accused Michelangelo of fraud. In retaliation, he supposedly responded by carving his name onto the sash. It remains the only work he ever signed.

## David

Michelangelo was later commissioned by the Signoria to make a large statue of David, to celebrate Florence's re-establishment. He was given a huge block of marble and from this, he produced this masterpiece. The Bible story of David, the young boy who killed the giant Goliath, was a popular one in Florence. Artists traditionally depicted the young hero after he killed Goliath, which Michelangelo chose to show him preparing for battle. With a stone in hand and a sling casually thrown over his shoulder, David has his gaze fixed on the distance on his brow furrowed in concentration. He is flawlessly and beautifully depicted with a calm, classical appearance. The figure was highly realistic but also idealized like a Greek God. The head and hands are exaggerated and appear too large for the body. However, this may be explained by the fact that the statue was originally planned for high up on the cathedral and therefore Michelangelo altered the proportions to ensure that the upward-looking viewpoint would not have caused distortions.



David's pose and gesture echo that of Venus from Botticelli's Birth of Venus. The turn of the head in a contrapposto pose suggests that Apollo Belvedere, which was discovered in Rome in the late 1400s may have also been an influence. The furrowed brow of the face and deeply carved curls suggests that Donatello's St George may have also been a contributory factor in the creation of David. After the unveiling of David, the Signoria were so impressed with him that they placed the

symbolic figure in the main square of the city, the Piazza del Signoria. Today, a copy has replaced it outside of the Palazzo Vecchio.

