

## A CRUCIFIX FOUND IN FLORENCE MAY BE A YOUTHFUL WORK BY THE MASTER



# A Missing Michelangelo?

For years the crucifix hung unnoticed, gathering dust and shadows in the monastery of Santo Spirito in Florence. Then along came Dr. Margrit Lisner, a German art historian searching for 15th Century crucifixes. She took one look at the painted wood sculpture of Christ and came to a startling conclusion: it had been carved by Michelangelo!

Dr. Lisner had good grounds for her belief. Art scholars have always known that around 1493, when he was 18 years old, Michelangelo carved a wooden

crucifix for the church that adjoined the monastery of Santo Spirito. It hung above the high altar until around 1600, when it was removed during alterations of the church. By the 19th Century it could not be found. If Dr. Lisner is right—and evidence shown on following pages has convinced some top experts that she is—the crucifix is one of the most important art discoveries of the century. It is also a timely bonanza for Florence, which this spring commemorates the 400th anniversary of Michelangelo's death.



## The Historical Clues That Led a Scholar On



**D**iscoverer of crucifix, Dr. Margit Lisner teaches at Freiburg University, specializes in Florentine crucifixes.



**A**ugustine monk, Father Bolognesi, stands in corridor where controversial crucifix was found. Another crucifix now hangs over corridor door (over).

**D**r. Lisner compares 15th and 16th Century works to prove her points. In crucifix made about 1145 by Donatello (right), the legs and the head are aligned. In Santo Spirito crucifix (center) the legs twist away from the head. Similar pose appears in the Crucifixion (far right) painted by Pontormo around 1530. Dr. Lisner believes Pontormo imitated Santo Spirito crucifix.

In the early 1490s Michelangelo worked in the palace and gardens of Lorenzo de' Medici who had set up an informal academy where artists could study his collection of antique sculpture. After Lorenzo died in 1492, Michelangelo went to the monastery of Santo Spirito and asked permission to make anatomical studies of corpses in the monastery's hospital. In return for this privilege, the young man carved a crucifix for the prieur of Santo Spirito. This was the only wood sculpture known to have been done by Michelangelo. The body was smaller than life-size and presumably was painted according to the custom of the times.

Three facts were in Dr. Lisner's mind when she spotted the crucifix in the monastery. The sculpture was of wood and smaller than life-size (four feet five inches high). What impressed her especially was the torsion of the body, the way the legs twisted in the opposite direction from the head. This contrasting movement, called *controposto*, is characteristic of Michelangelo's figures. But, says Dr. Lisner, the *controposto* pose does not occur in other 15th Century crucifixes (below, left) until after 1494. She surmises that Michelangelo's crucifix, which was prominently displayed in one of the most important churches of Florence, influenced later artists. To back up her theory, she points to examples like the fresco (below, right), painted by Jacopo Pontormo

about 1530, which bears a remarkable resemblance to the Santo Spirito crucifix.

Experts who disagree with Dr. Lisner's attribution say that the *controposto* pose was already evident in the 1480s in the work of Leonardo da Vinci. By the time Pontormo painted his fresco, everybody was "doing it." The fact that the painted Crucifixion resembles the carved crucifix may well be explained in another way, say the counterexperts: both works were probably produced around the same time.

Not likely, says Dr. Lisner, scolding the report of technicians in the restoration laboratories of Florence's Uffizi galleries. They examined the paint on the crucifix and declared that it exactly corresponds to the finely ground colors used in the late 15th Century. But Dr. Lisner neglects to add that the technicians also report that such fine colors continued to be used well into the 16th Century.



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**D**r. Lissner supports her theory by comparing the legs of the crucifix (far right) with the legs of Christ in Michelangelo's famous *Pietà* (right). In both works the legs are slender and graceful. Other experts protest that the *Pietà* carving is far more detailed, showing veins, muscles, fleshy surfaces with astonishing subtlety and precision. But this could be explained by the fact that the *Pietà* was carved some five years after Michelangelo made his crucifix. By 1498 he had acquired much greater skill than he had at 18.



## Some Telling Comparisons of Carved Legs

**A** key argument of Dr. Lissner's focuses on the right leg of the crucifix (center), which bends and twists to the left. She compares this pose to that of a boy (detail, now right) in a relief called *Madness of the Sines*, which Michelangelo carved about 1491. This boy, she says, bends his leg in much the same way as the crucifix. So does the satyr (far right), who stands beside the figure of Bacchus, a life-size sculpture that Michelangelo carved around 1496.



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CRUCIFIX CONTINUED





The head of the crucifix (above), in Dr. Lisner's opinion, is strikingly like the head of Christ (left) and also that of the Virgin (right) in the *Pietà*. She points to the sharply defined noses, the carving of Christ's hair, the solemnity of the expressions. But other experts consider the comparison damaging to

Dr. Lisner's thesis. They disparage the crucifix, criticizing its rigidly straight, pencil-thin nose, its flattened miniature mouth and skimpy, matted hair. The Santo Spirito crucifix, they say, exhibits none of the subtle modeling that characterizes the *Pietà* and made Michelangelo famous at the age of 23.



The *Battle of the Centaurs* was carved about 1492 while Michelangelo was studying antique art.

## Experts Against Experts

The discovery of the Santo Spirito crucifix has churned up a controversy which may boil on for years. Lined up with Dr. Lisner are two highly respected scholars, Charles de Tolnay of Princeton and John Pope-Hennessy of London. Both are impressed by the fact that the crucifix tallies with historical records. But their analyses of the work are at odds. Pope-Hennessy is impressed by its "Hellenistic, classical look which is extraordinarily similar to . . . the *Pietà*." De Tolnay, on the other hand, believes that the crucifix "tries to follow the Gothic tradition of sculpture."

The discrepancy between these two views is no greater than the contrast between the crucifix and Michelangelo's known early works. His *Madonna of the Stairs* (below), carved when he was about 16, shows his liking for massive forms. Even the Christ Child has the build of a boxer. In the *Battle of the Centaurs* (above), which Michelangelo carved a year later, the bodies are even more massive, their muscles knowingly emphasized. These brawny figures bear little relationship to the delicate, effeminate body of the crucifix. This is "indeed a little problem," admits De Tolnay, and so he speculates that Michelangelo carved this crucifix even before he carved the reliefs. Perhaps, he says, this is an earlier Michelangelo work that nobody ever heard of—a speculation

which automatically eliminates the crucifix's connection with the historical documentation that impressed De Tolnay in the first place.

Professor Ulrich Middeldorf, head of the German Art History Institute in Florence, thinks Dr. Lisner is all wrong. "Such an ignorance of anatomy and a poverty of modeling," says he, "would have been a very poor gift for Michelangelo to have made to the prior as a recompense for having made anatomical studies in the hospital mortuary." More moderate is Florentine Historian Paola Barocchi: "It's a rare and lovely piece. . . . But I would date it 40 or 50 years later than Dr. Lisner."

In the midst of the scholarly turmoil, the monks of Santo Spirito are wide-eyed. "We knew it was a fine work," says Father Renato Bolognesi, "but we had no idea it was so valuable. Now they say it is worth more than \$3 million."



*Madonna of the Stairs*, a small marble relief, is the earliest extant sculpture by Michelangelo.