

Julia LEVITINA, sculptor.

*Concerning Michelangelo: Irving Stone's portrait of the great master in biographical novel, The Agony and the Ecstasy.*

Some 15 years ago, while in Florence for the very first time, I happened across Irving Stone's book at the Uffizi gift shop. I remember diving into it while seated on the stone steps in the Piazza della Signoria, on the very steps young Michelangelo in the book would sit with his friends from the Ghirlandaio *bottega*. Legendary figures of Ghiberti, Donatello, Bartoldo, came to life and were once again walking narrow medieval streets a few steps ahead of me. I followed Michelangelo around town: to the fountain where he washed himself after dissecting at Santo Spirito, to his home in via Ghibellina, to the bronze David overlooking Florence and the marble David at the Accademia, to the Medici chapel he had designed, to draw from the magnificent figures of Day and Night, Dawn and Dusk, to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo to sketch from his next to last Pietà.

I knew I was an artist before I was born. I knew I wanted to be a sculptor. Yet, I had no idea how I was going to go about making sculpture my life, and would have given just about anything to find out. Stone's interpretation of what could have been Bartoldo's words to the young Michelangelo resonated: "One does not become an artist because he can but because he must. It is only for those who are miserable without it."

Now, some 15 years later, I returned to draw at the Medici chapel and came across Stone's book again. I hesitated at first, worried that his insights about sculpture I found so profound so many years ago would now seem, at best, banal. However, still blown away by my recent visit to Pietrasanta marble carving *laboratorio* and to the marble quarries of Carrara, frequented by Michelangelo, I picked it up anyway.

I re-read *The Agony and the Ecstasy* in a single breath, as a sculptor now, actively creating to expand my existing body of work, having recently completed a large public commission and a few smaller private ones, having exhibited and taught and generally accrued respectable mastery of my craft, I was astounded by how much I have absorbed and retained from the book that, so many years ago, left what has proven to be such a lasting impression. Needless to say, I found it neither dull nor shallow.

Forever searching for the inner truth in order to create meaningful works capable of transcending the age in which he lived, content only with the finest he could produce and creating each time far beyond his abilities, refusing in any way to compromise the integrity on which his life was built, "an artist working at the top of his powers exists in a realm beyond human happiness" but is nevertheless fueled by love, trusting in the overall goodness of humanity existing in an overall benevolent universe.

Stone's portrait of Michelangelo became to me a personification of what it means to create genuinely great art that questions inasmuch as it strives authentically to offer up answers.

*{Michelangelo} stood below the figure {of David}, feeling insignificant, weak and homely, powerless now that the statue was out of his hands, asking himself: "How much of what I wanted to say have I managed to convey?"*

In another 15 years, I think I will be reading Irving Stone's book again.

*Florence, 2018*