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MICHELANGELO'S BRONZE CORPUS,
DOCUMENTED IN SEVILLE 1597,
REDISCOVERED



INSTITUTE OF OLD MASTERS RESEARCH

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DISCUSSION



Sor Jerónima de la Fuente, Velázquez
Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research

MICHELANGELO SCULPTOR IN BRONZE

DISCUSSION WITH CARLOS HERRERO STARKIE

The Institute of Old Masters Research has rediscovered a Renaissance bronze crucifix, cast from Michelangelo's original model. The artefact was unveiled at TEFAF 2025.

Few rediscoveries in the world of art have generated as much excitement and debate as the bronze Corpus Christi unearthed by Carlos Herrero Starkie, director and founder of the Institute of Old Masters Research (IOMR). Documented in Seville in 1597 and believed lost for centuries, this four-nailed crucifix was cast in Rome in 1560s, likely by Jacob Cornelisz Cobaert under the direction of Guglielmo della Porta, using a wax model created by Michelangelo himself. The crucifix, measuring just 25 cm in height, bears all the hallmarks of Michelangelo's design: heterodox design, anatomical precision, spiritual poise and emotional restraint.

According to Francisco Pacheco, Velázquez's teacher and one of Seville's most prominent art theorists, Michelangelo's four-nailed bronze Crucifix was brought to Spain from Rome in 1597 and used to produce a series of early casts in silver and polychromed bronze that transformed the iconography of the Crucifixion in Spain and New World. This long-lost original bronze Corpus, now rediscovered, was presented at TEFAF 2025 Stuart Lochhead stand, in a landmark display that paired it with Velázquez's *Sor Jerónima de la Fuente*, which depicts the very same model in painted form. The exhibition was more than a curatorial coup; it was an interplay across centuries of two works that had long been separated but were deeply entwined.

Could you share your experience at TEFAF and your impression of the exhibition?

It was an extraordinary experience. The stand designed by Stuart Lochhead was a piece of art in its own right. I had not seen it until the fair and it was a triumph of design and curatorial vision. Stuart created a space that was

both modern and reverent, with a subtle Japanese aesthetic. The centerpiece was, of course, the bronze Corpus attributed to Michelangelo, presented in conversation with a painting that depicts the very same model by Velázquez. This juxtaposition, divided by an elegant screen, offered a strong dialogue between sculpture and painting, as well as between two masters of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Beyond the visual impact, what struck me most was the atmosphere around the stand. The Spanish and international press extensively covered the presentation. Many people seemed surprised, especially since the presence of the Velázquez and Michelangelo's pieces was not revealed until just a few days before the opening and TEFAF provided the perfect stage for this unveiling.

— *Pierre Naquin and Nahir Fuente*



Corpus Christi, Michelangelo

Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research

How did you manage to bring together Velázquez and Michelangelo's Corpus?

It was a matter of personal trust and long-standing relationships, but also of shared conviction. I have been a friend of the Araoz family since school — our ties go back generations; my grandfather, Walter Starkie, was great friend of their grandfather Gregorio Marañón — and they were aware of the crucifix from the very first moment I discovered it. They recognized its importance and were informed about the academic and technological grounds which support the discovery, published in our book "Michelangelo's bronze Corpus, documented in Seville 1597, rediscovered" IOMR 2024. I was convinced that a major exhibition, presenting both Masterpieces at an international venue such as Tefaf, would offer experts, curators and academic researchers the opportunity to engage in discussion about the discovery and, by examining the piece in person, appreciate, both the exquisite craftsmanship characteristic of a Renaissance bronze masterpiece and the significance of such a heterodox design, one that could only be conceived by a genius like Michelangelo. Indeed, I was also aware about the strict Tefaf's vetting committee. However, as I was fully confident in the solid grounds of the discovery, I considered a first-hand inspection of the piece by most knowledgeable curators in sculpture and fine arts, a positive factor. Hopefully everything went as expected and, after reading the technological tests, inspecting the piece and comparing academic reports, they confirmed what Stuart Lochhead had prudently proposed as the cataloging entry of the piece --- that the newly discovered bronze was the result of a fruitful collaboration between Michelangelo, as the

designer of the model, and Guglielmo della Porta, the bronze-smith sculptor who supervised in Rome the casting, likely executed by Jacob Cornelisz Cobaert, his most talented goldsmith, during 1560s ---. Stuart Lochhead, who fell in love of the piece since he saw the Crucifix in the library of the Institute, also believed in the presentation from the start. His support was indispensable, as he covered the high insurance and transport cost of the Velázquez. As we expected, press media gave due resonance to the event and researchers, conservators, collectors and museum professionals quietly contributed their insights, making it a collective achievement.

Which is in fact the historical link between Michelangelo's four-nails model and Velázquez painting?

The link between Michelangelo's model and Velázquez's painting was already historically grounded. Michelangelo's four -nails bronze crucifix model was documented as having been brought by Juan Bautista Franconio from Rome to Seville in 1597, as recorded by Francisco Pacheco, Velázquez's teacher and an essential figure in Seville artistic world. He expressly recognized to have polychromed a bronze cast directly mould from Michelangelo's bronze Crucifix model. Most likely this polychromed Crucifix remained in his workshop and was later reproduced by Velázquez in his portrait of Sor Jerónima de la Fuente. Pacheco described the bronze Crucifix model in his "*Arte de la pintura*", as in *Seville*, 33 years after Michelangelo's death, providing rare documentary evidence that binds these two masters across time and medium. In a way, the connection was already there; it just needed to be physically manifested and rationally argued. Bringing the two

works together into the same physical space after centuries was not merely a curatorial gesture, but a shared effort by people who believed in the importance of telling this story.

Was there much interest in acquiring the Corpus?

Yes, there were significant enquiries from American and Northern Europe collectors. However, I had expected that a museum would have reserved the piece directly at the fair, bearing in mind we were presenting the most refined extant example of Michelangelo's four nails Crucifix model: a true Museum masterpiece with a compelling story to tell. Although there was great interest from curators in the inherent quality of the bronze, its connection to Michelangelo and the extensive documentation supporting its attribution, proposing acquisitions to their donors and committees simply requires more time to process the broader implications of a discovery that concern both a bronze sculpture and Michelangelo himself. This is all the more so, as the artefact is cast in bronze, a medium that involves several craftsmen beyond the original designer. In fact, Museums tend to be particularly cautious when it comes to bronze attribution due to its collaborative nature and even more so when Michelangelo is involved, despite the scholarly consensus attributing the design to him. Anyhow, I am confident that a private Museum will acquire or an important private collector will donate the Corpus to a public Museum, so that, its significance will evolve freely, promoting a better understanding on Michelangelo's intimate spiritual feelings and his involvement in bronze. Something we have tried to undertake since we discovered the piece and published our book.

How did you first come across the bronze Corpus?

Almost by chance. It appeared in the Spanish market coming from a San Sebastian collector and was not immediately recognized for its true value. Its small size and the prevalence in Spain of similar pieces cast from it, made it easy to overlook. But I recognized the quality straight away. The execution, the details and the sense of pathos mixed with serenity and peacefully relief after pain, were unmistakable. I recalled Pacheco's writings and realized this could be the long-lost bronze model by Michelangelo. I had it examined by my restorer who came expressly from Valladolid and crucially found traces of wax and gesso, indicating it had been used as a casting model.

What made you confident enough that Michelangelo and della Porta were involved in the production of the bronze?

Although in this case the design was unanimously ascribed to Michelangelo, I realized since the beginning that any claim involving Michelangelo invites scepticism. Furthermore, its superb quality led me to believe we were looking at a bronze prototype directly cast from an original wax model and the historical context matched perfectly. Thus, it became a matter of scientifically establishing the date and the casting techniques, in order to substantiate my first impressions about when, by whom and where it was crafted. In this sense the fact that the MET possessed a similar crucifix of inferior quality yet attributed to Michelangelo's design by highly respected scholars as, Manuel Gómez Moreno, John Philips Goldsmith, Charles de Tolnay, Pietro Marani and more recently Paul Joannides, helped me in a way to support my case. Although intuition plays a role at the outset,

you need data to proceed. To provide evidence, we conducted technical studies at the CSIC and SGS technos that included alloy analysis by XRF spectrometry, microscope and radiographic imaging. The alloy composition data provided by the Rijksmuseum on other bronzes cast in Rome circa 1560 closely matched that of our Crucifix, in particular a bronze plaque cast by Cobaert, with similar degree of impurities, (arsenic, antimony and nickel) typical of a Tyrolean Falherz copper used at mid XVI cent in Rome. The technique, including a small vent hole on top of the head for pouring the bronze, thread screws and soft-soldered silver joints in the arms, was consistent with methods used by della Porta's workshop in Rome during 1560s, supporting the proposal of dating and context of production. In addition, the Corpus exhibit anatomical and stylistic features consistent with Michelangelo's aesthetic —the minute and faithful description of musculature, its nudity, the naturalistic way the lifeless body hang, the positioning of the limbs and above all the pathos conveyed through the expression of the face— Finally the original patina, that still retains the indelible traces of the wax process, suggested that the piece was likely a prototype cast directly from Michelangelo's wax model.

Was that cross-disciplinary collaboration important to you?

Absolutely. It was about understanding the object from every possible angle. The strength of this attribution stems from the convergence of numerous disciplines. When everyone across different fields starts to see the same story emerge, you know you are on to something meaningful.

Can you elaborate on the letters between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna and how they relate to the Corpus?

These letters, exchanged between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna in the late 1530s have long been considered among the most personal and poetic documents in Michelangelo's correspondence. I have in-depth studied three letters that traditionally have been interpreted as referring to a drawing, specifically to the living Christ on the Cross in the British Museum. However, my interpretation, supported by scholars, such as Michael Riddick, suggested otherwise: that the letters refer not to a drawing, but to a wax model of a crucifix which, according to the first letter, Vittoria Colonna received from Michelangelo for a time, as if Michelangelo was expecting its return, likely for completing a project which is only implied in the correspondence. In the second letter she writes about examining the piece with light, a mirror and magnifying glass, tools that suggest the observation of a three-dimensional object. She notes the piece's "unperfected" state, yet praises its beauty and minute finishing of all its details, as if she was speaking about a work of Art in two different stages ---a model and final work --- and doubting if Michelangelo was directly involved in the process. Something entirely coherent with a bronze casting process and that rules out the reference to a drawing. In the third letter Michelangelo, express both his discontent regarding how she returns the Crucifix through an intermediary and an exculpatory tone regarding the Marchesa disappointment by his failure to complete the project he was meant to undertake. Given their deep friendship — one marked by mutual admiration, theological exploration, and artistic exchange — it is

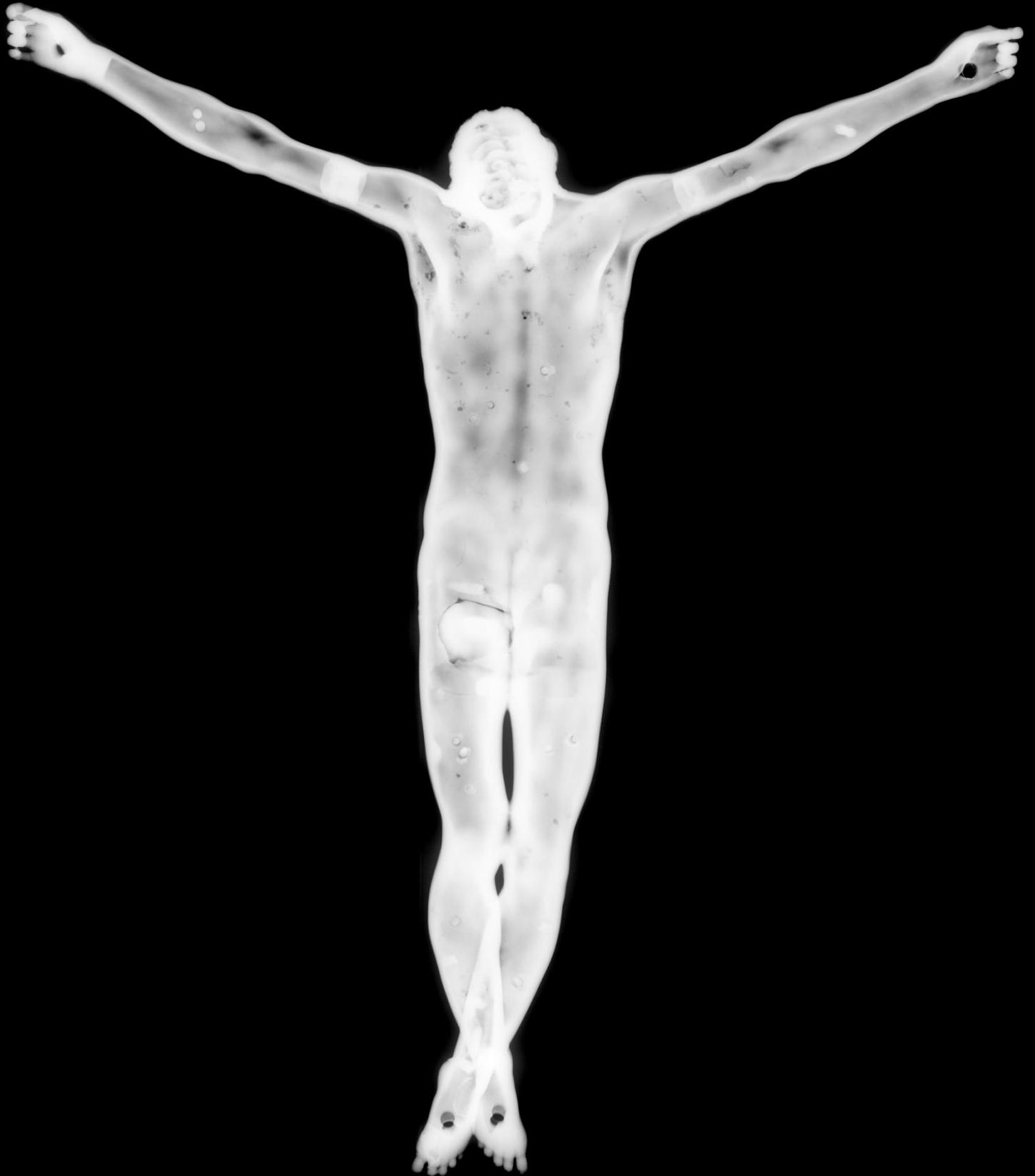


Presentation of Michelangelo's Corpus Christi at TEFAF

Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research



Corpus Christi, Michelangelo
Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research



X-Ray of the Corpus Christi, Michelangelo

Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research

plausible that Michelangelo created the original model for her. This aligns closely with a model awaiting casting. The descriptions fit a physical sculpture rather than a sketch.

How do you think this discovery shifts our understanding of Michelangelo's output as a sculptor?

I would be satisfied if I have, to some extent, contributed on the hand to a reconsideration of Michelangelo in bronze, in line of few extant Greek bronzes or Roman replicas praised by art historians, and, on the other hand, to a reevaluation of Bronze as a medium that gives a sense of permanence and immutability to design -bronze as a material that can endure multiple civilizations, quoting Renaissance bronze collector Peter Marino in a recent interview-. Something of a particular importance with Michelangelo's designs. Michelangelo was clearly not only a master of marble, but also a designer of bronzes, even though he did not always intervene in the casting process himself. Vasari and his biographer, Condivi, expressly refer to very important monumental bronze sculptural projects. The David commissioned in 1502 by Pierre Royan for Louis XII of France, the colossal seated statue of Pope Julius II for San Petronio in Bologna, 1506 and in his late years an equestrian sculpture of King Henry II of France, commissioned by Catherine de Medicis. Unfortunately, none of these works remains from these artistic feats, some of them undertaken in close competition with Leonardo. All these monumental sculptures were melted for producing canons in different military contends. In fact, nowadays there are only a few small statues in bronze attributed to Michelangelo which belong more to what in the Renaissance was

properly referred as "statuaria": the Hercules Pomarius bronze, the Samson and the Philistines bronze, the Rothschild pair of bronze bacchantes on panthers and the four nails bronze Crucifix which we are talking about. All of them, in a strict sense, may not be considered as autograph works by Michelangelo, because there is no evidence that the Master intervenes in the process of casting, as it is documented he did with monumental sculptures. Fortunately for the preservation of some Michelangelo 's designs, members of his circle, like Raffaello da Montelupo, Guglielmo della Porta, Daniele Volterra or Jacopo del Ducca siciliano, faithfully translated them into bronze, during his live or just after his death in 1564. A comprehensive study of Michelangelo in bronze remains an open field and far from conclusive. As a matter of fact, it is remarkable that only two monographic publications have been devoted to Michelangelo bronzes, the volume edited by Dr Victoria Avery with the support of interdisciplinary scholars invited by the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and the recently issued by the Institute of Old Masters Research.

Is this why there is a certain reluctance to embrace a fully attribution to Michelangelo?

First of all, I must say that the piece presented at Tefaf is an object of an extraordinary artistic transcendence and exceptional scholarly significance: the most refined extant example of a bronze Crucifix designed by Michelangelo and cast in Rome during his life or just after his death. This was the essence of our proposal of attribution and in purity what Tefaf vetting has accepted.

Is it sufficient to talk about an autograph work?

In my opinion, if we believe, as I do, that Michelangelo has intervened in the completion of the original wax model from which the bronze has been cast, then the autograph character of the piece should be fully accepted. Although in a strictest sense an indirect bronze is difficult to be classified as an autograph work, we should remain open to the idea that the authorship can also reside in design and creative intent, when the work is conceived by the Master, executed during his live, probably under his direction and shows a level of quality which respond to a master standard, all the more so in a context of Renaissance collaborative work-shop practices. In this sense, on the one hand the heterodox design, level of detail and emotional intensity found in this Corpus is no doubt consistent with Michelangelo's vision and on the other hand its bronze medium challenges the purist view of an autograph work and enriches our understanding of his broader impact. The question is that what is acceptable for Donatello, Cellini or Giambologna, does not work for Michelangelo because there is a long-standing scholarly tradition universally accepted that relates Michelangelo sculptor with marble. In modern times, where the autograph character has lost its predominance, shifting to emphasize the importance of conception and design over manual execution, one should expected scholars and curators as being more prone to define the autograph character of a work of art, as reflecting a broader pattern in art history, depending on cultural and historical circumstances. For instance, scholars have long resisted the idea that ancient Greek sculptures were painted because we are still influenced by Winkelman and Classicism. In this sense there is also a resistance to the notion of Michelangelo in bronze. This rigid framework can hinder our understanding of Renaissance workshop practices and collaborative nature of many works. Ultimately, we need more open dialogue, transparency in research and the willingness to revise the canon when the evidence demands it. We hope this discovery fully argued in our book "Michelangelo's bronze Corpus documented in Seville 1597, rediscovered" IOMR 2024 challenges long-held assumptions, being a step forward for the discipline.



Carlos Herrero Starkie

Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research



Stephanie Breydel and Carlos Herrero Starkie examining Michelangelo's *Corpus Christi*

Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research



Carlos Herrero Starkie and Ignacio Lasa Georgas at TEFAF Maastricht

Courtesy Institute of Old Masters Research