



KINGS OF THE STONE AGE

From Michelangelo's magnificent marbles to Brunelleschi's "impossible" dome to the legacy of the Medicis, **Ute Junker** discovers the stories carved into Florentine stones.

THE STATUES IN FLORENCE do not stand still. Wherever you look, the stone figures seem to have been caught in the middle of frenetic activity: torsos twisting, muscles flexing. In the Bargello, a former prison that is now the national sculpture museum, a tipsy Bacchus is caught in a moment of unsteadiness, trying to arrest his sway. He seems positively restrained, however, when compared with the four unfinished slave statues over in the Accademia Gallery. Unlike the drunken god, who retains some composure, these are beings possessed, appearing to fight their way free of the rocks from which they were hewn in a struggle to be born.

Why are Florence's statues so filled with vitality? The answer is simple: Michelangelo. Florence's most famous son made an art of capturing struggle in stone. His figures – such as Bacchus and the unfinished slaves – are always twisting, tense if not tortured. Michelangelo changed the game. After seeing his sculptures, no-one was interested in static statues. They expected figures to be full of life and sculptors had to deliver. ➤

Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, with its Brunelleschi dome



SCULPTING FLORENCE

Michelangelo's influence can be seen in the Loggia dei Lanzi, the city's preeminent *al fresco* sculpture gallery. The sculptures on display, the work of later artists such as Giambologna, are full of Michelangelo-style movement. Hercules swings his arm back to deliver the death blow to a writhing centaur. Nearby, virile Romans strain their muscles lifting Sabine women who are struggling desperately to free themselves.

Contorted bodies were just one of Michelangelo's legacies. The other was his choice of material. He was mad about marble – Carrara marble, quarried near Florence and characterised by a creamy white or pale grey colour. Although also famous for monumental frescoes and paintings, he saw himself primarily as a sculptor and his signature works – such as the giant statue of David, on display in the Accademia – were done in marble.

Michelangelo was many things: a sculptor, an architect, a poet, a painter, one of the great geniuses of the Renaissance. What he was above all else, however, was Florentine. More than

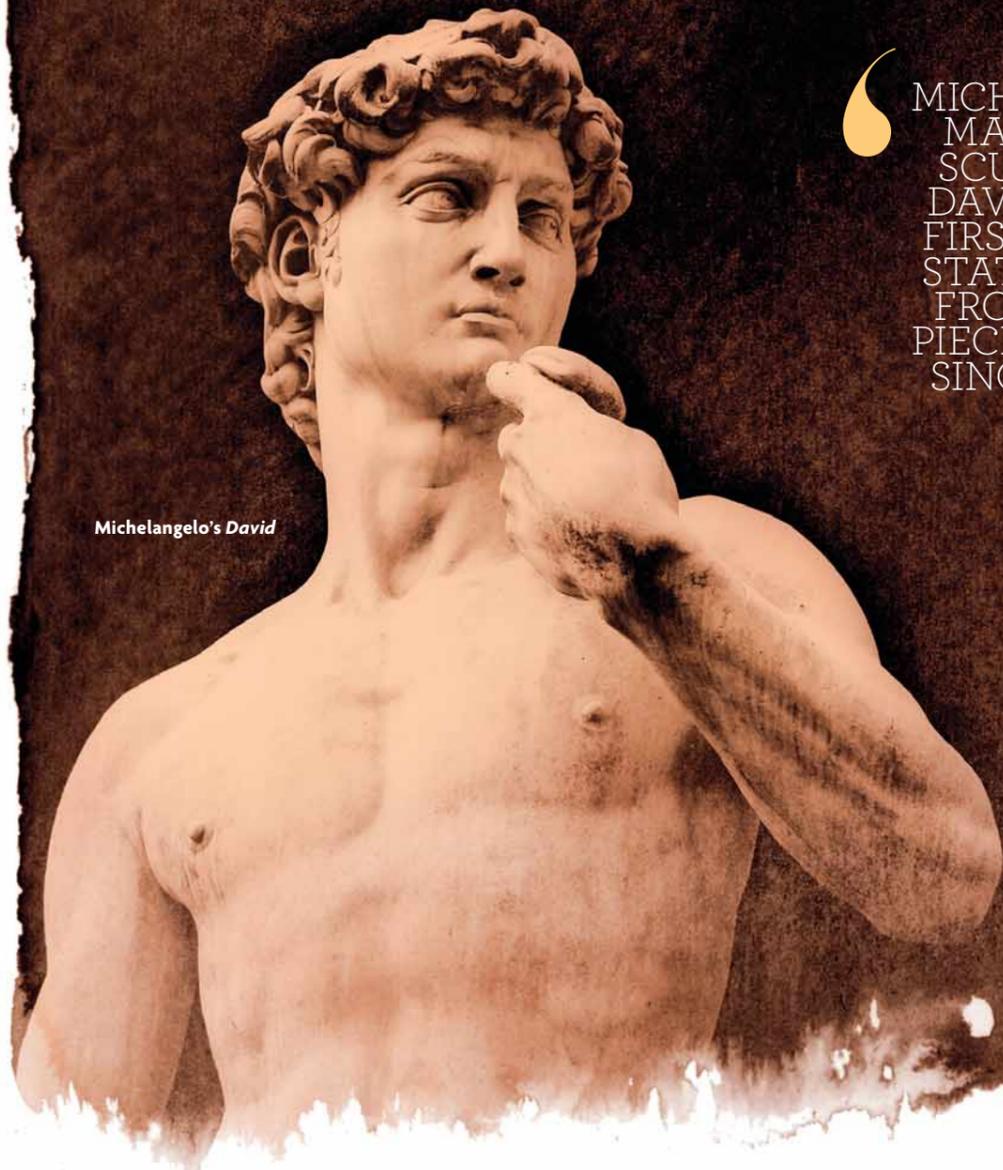
most cities, Florence has an affinity for stone. Here, in what is often described as the birthplace of the Renaissance, the city's artists achieved their greatest triumphs working in stone.

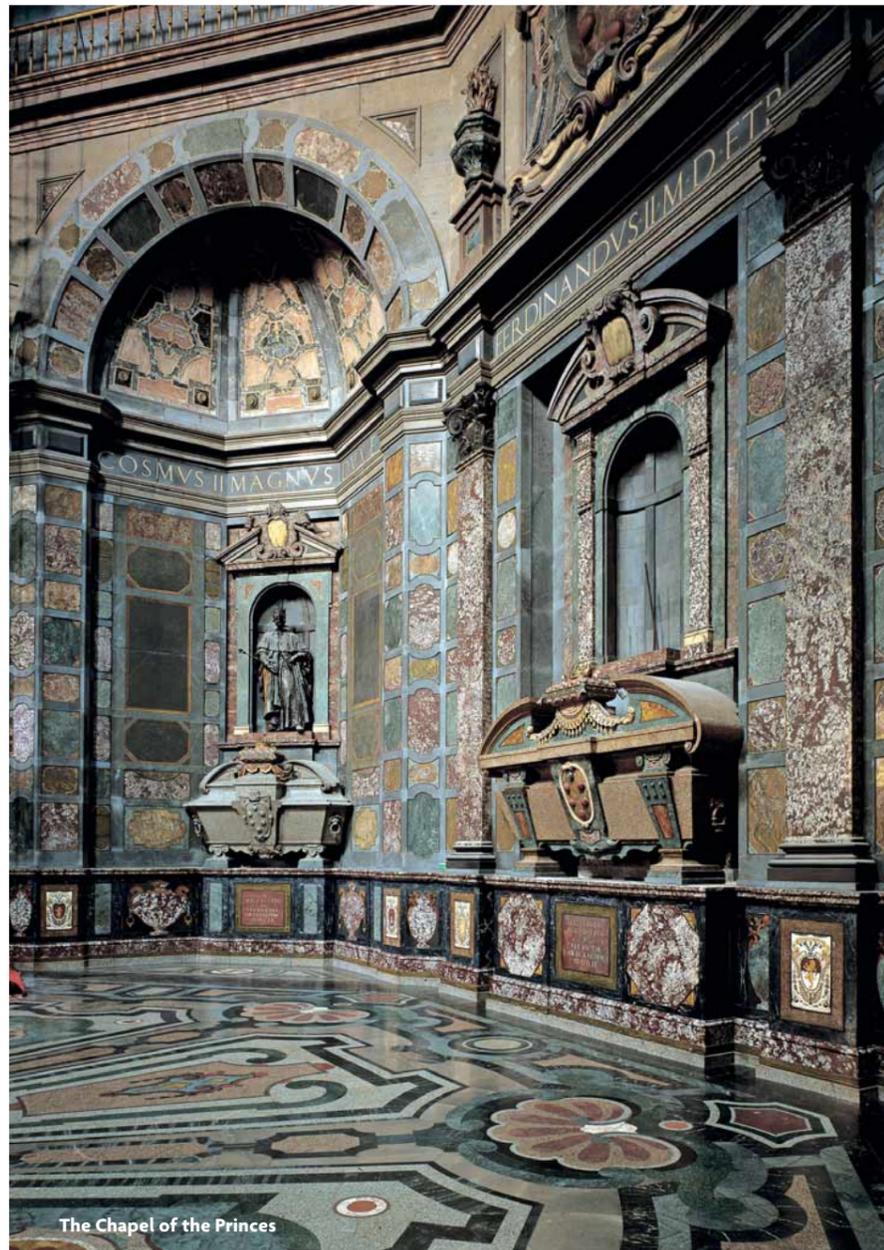
THE CAPITAL of Tuscany, Florence is the city where Filippo Brunelleschi astounded the world's architects and engineers by constructing a dome for the city's cathedral (the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore) that was so massive no-one believed it could be done. Brunelleschi invented new engineering techniques and used four million bricks in the dome, including triangular and other odd shapes.

Similarly, Michelangelo's magnificent sculpture of David was the first colossal statue carved from a single piece of marble since ancient times (his earlier Bacchus had been something of a test run). To make his task even more difficult, Michelangelo was given a shallow block of marble that had been badly roughed out by another sculptor. >

MICHELANGELO'S
MAGNIFICENT
SCULPTURE OF
DAVID WAS THE
FIRST COLOSSAL
STATUE CARVED
FROM A SINGLE
PIECE OF MARBLE
SINCE ANCIENT
TIMES

Michelangelo's David





The Chapel of the Princes

Florentine sculptors weren't the only ones to appreciate Carrara marble. It also features in the facades of some of the city's most beautiful buildings. The Church of Santa Maria Novella has a striking facade of white and dark green marble, which is unlike anything else in town. "This is the only Renaissance facade in Florence," says local guide Valerie Niemeyer. "It stands out for its geometry and mathematical proportion: beautiful, measurable, symmetrical."

A much later example can be found in the neo-Gothic facade of the Church of Santa Croce - the church was consecrated in 1444, but the facade wasn't completed until 1865. It has an intricate pattern of white, pink and green marble.

Niemeyer leads the Colours of Florence walk for Context Travel, which examines the history of Florence through its building materials. The revealing tour shows that you don't need to step into a museum to learn about history. It's all around you. Take the city's spacious piazzas. Never merely decorative, the purpose of each square depends on its placement. The piazzas outside the grand churches of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce were designed as places where large crowds could assemble to hear the word of God.

IN FLORENCE
YOU DON'T
NEED TO STEP
INTO A MUSEUM
TO LEARN ABOUT
HISTORY. IT'S ALL
AROUND YOU

THE PIAZZAS created by the civic authorities had a very different purpose. Rather than saving souls, the city fathers were concerned about saving the government. The Piazza della Signoria outside the Palazzo Vecchio, for instance, was created through a clearance program. In the event of public insurrection, the administration wanted to ensure that the seat of government, the Palazzo Vecchio, could be defended easily.

Even the materials used in the buildings have stories behind them. The Florentines used the stones they had to hand. The city surrounds were dotted with quarries - even the Garden of Boboli, behind the Pitti Palace,

was once a quarry. The most common stone in the area is the honey-coloured sandstone called *pietraforte* (strong stone) used to construct many of the city's most famous buildings, from the Palazzo Vecchio to the cathedral to the city walls.

The sandstone is often relieved with feature stones such as pale-green serpentine from Prato, red marble called *portasanta* and *pietra serena* (calm stone), a grey stone that is often used decoratively to relieve severe facades. "Brunelleschi was among the first to use this stone as an architectural feature," Niemeyer says.

The elegant proportions that characterise so much Florentine architecture are a reminder that for many centuries, the city's most powerful bodies were its artist guilds, including sculptors, builders, textile workers and masons. They generated the wealth that gave the city its power, and they patronised the sculptors and architects who enriched the city with their work. No wonder so many of the projects they commissioned stand as true works of art.

Like any city, Florence has changed its face several times over the centuries. Traditionally, it was a city that had hidden its wealth behind simple, unadorned walls. Under the Medici family, Florence >

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



Michelangelo's unfinished slaves

gradually began to develop a love of display. Churches such as the Santa Maria Novella had their plain exteriors updated with more ostentatious designs, while elegant new buildings such as the Palazzo Medici Riccardi were erected.

The best illustration of what mediaeval Florence looked like can be found at the Basilica of San Lorenzo, one of the city's oldest and most important churches. The city's original cathedral had its function usurped by Arnolfo di Cambio and Brunelleschi's creation, but remained the family church of the powerful Medici family.

Seen from the outside, there's little to suggest its importance. Its dimensions are clearly spacious, but the rough-hewn surface, with its crumbling bricks, is reminiscent of an overgrown barn. Michelangelo designed a marble facade to replace the rough exterior, but never got around to delivering the project. The detailed plans still exist, and occasionally Michelangelo fans try to revive them. However, it seems the Florentines have retained a fondness for a bit of rough – so far, at least, the worn facade has survived.

Perhaps they learned their lesson from the Medici's hubristic Chapel of the Princes, constructed 1604-1640. This grandiose project was the last fling of the family that shaped much of the city – and it broke with tradition in many ways. It is not a structure that could be described as understated. The interior of the octagonal chapel is Baroque bling, every surface covered in semiprecious stones and multi-coloured marble. Its gaudy stonework contrasts with the clean lines that dominate the rest of the city. The ambitious design not only exceeded the boundaries of taste, it also helped sink the Medici fortunes. The rare stones, shipped in from distant lands, were ruinously expensive. Money ran out more than once, and the entire design took several centuries to complete – proving that the Florentines had been right all along in choosing to keep it local.



Borgo Santo Pietro

Tuscany from the inside

Travel consultant **MERRION CHARLES** shares her favourite places across the storied region of Tuscany, where she has lived and worked since 2007.

BEST BOUTIQUE HOTEL

BORGO SANTO PIETRO
Località Palazzetto, Chiusdino.
(0577) 751 222.
borgosantopietro.com

Relaxed and friendly, Borgo Santo Pietro is a very special find in a relatively untouched corner of central Tuscany. It's the ideal setting for a romantic weekend or special occasion. From €395 (\$560).

BEST ESPRESSO

NANNINI
24 Via Banchi di Sopra, Siena.
grupponannini.it
Just behind Siena's famous Campo, Nannini not only makes the best

espresso in town, but also sells three of Tuscany's trademark *dolce – panforte, ricciarelli and cantucci*. Don't be put off by the tourists, the locals shop here, too.

BEST FASHION

LA RINASCENTE
Piazza della Repubblica, Firenze.
www.rinascente.it
Founded in 1865 and renamed by poet Gabriele d'Annunzio in 1917 when it was bought by the Borletti family, Rinascente set a trend for luxury shopping in elegant surroundings. From Armani to Zegna, all the prestige Italian labels are here to tempt. ➤

STATUES PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; BORGO SANTO PIETRO: COURTESY OF HOTEL

SCULPTING FLORENCE

BEST DELI

PIZZICHERIA LA GROTTA
DELL'ANFITEATRO
2 Via Anfiteatro, Lucca.
alimenterilagrotta.com

A feast for the eyes as much as the stomach, this deli showcases many Lucchese specialties such as *Lardo di Colonnata* and *Sugo al ragu Lucchese*, and is centrally located.

BEST FIVE-STAR HOTEL

IL PELLICANO HOTEL
Località Sbarcatello,
Porto Ercole (Grosseto).
(0564) 858 111. pellicanohotel.com

One of the world's most tasteful small hotels, Relais & Châteaux member Il Pellicano more than delivers on expectations, thanks in no small part to its seafront location. From €428 (\$607).

BEST MARKET

CENTRAL MARKET
& SAN LORENZO
Piazza del Mercato Centrale,
Florence. [florence-on-line.com/
markets/central-market.html](http://florence-on-line.com/markets/central-market.html)

The covered area inside is the original food market, spread over two floors – it's a must-visit for foodies. Outside, street stalls sell quality leather and cashmere.

BEST WINE BAR

CAFFÈ FIASCHETTERIA
ITALIANA
Piazza del Popolo, Montalcino.
(0577) 849 043.
caffefiaschetteriaitaliana.com

Founded in 1888 and known to locals as "Floriano", this cafe is a perfect example of Italian Art Deco. It's fun, relaxed and a must-stop on the Tuscan wine trail.

BEST CASUAL DINING

OSTERIA LE LOGGE
33 Via del Porrione, Siena.
(0577) 48013.
osterialeloggesiena.it

Located just off the Campo in the heart of Siena, this trattoria is one of the town's most reliable eateries. Order the *ribollita*, a hearty and traditional peasant soup.

BEST HIGH-END DINING

RISTORANTE ARNOLFO
50-52 Via XX Settembre,
Colle di Val d'Elsa.
(0577) 920 549. arnolfo.com

I once ordered a risotto here that came with 14 different green herbs. Superb! This understated restaurant now possesses two well-deserved Michelin stars. ↗

ONLINE

ON TOUR IN ITALY

For insider city guides, where to eat and even how to party like a local, visit qantas.com/travelinsider

✈ For airfares and holiday packages to Florence call Qantas Holidays on 1300 735 542 or visit qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF IL PELLICANO HOTEL

“ ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST TASTEFUL SMALL HOTELS ”



Il Pellicano
Hotel pool