

This photo is available in
the print version of *Aging*.

The powerful elderly prophet had learned much from his experience with God over the years, yet Moses would have greater adventures ahead as the leader of the wilderness generation. Michelangelo's "Moses" retains the strength and fortitude necessary for these challenges.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), MOSES, 1513-16; 1542-45. Marble, Height 7'8 ½". San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, Italy/Bridgeman Art Library. Commissioned by Pope Julius II for his tomb.

Strength and Fortitude

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Moses is usually depicted as a distinguished and powerful older man. This great lawgiver, who communicated directly with God on Mount Sinai on several occasions, also has horns!

Those horns have an interesting history. “As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand,” Exodus records, “Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (34:29). The Hebrew word “*qaran*,” translated “shone” in Exodus 34:29-35, can mean “to send out rays” or “to display or grow horns.” Either way, *qaran* signifies power. When St. Jerome translated the Bible into the Latin vulgate (or common-day language) in 406, he chose “*cornuta*,” the word for horns, as a figurative translation of *qaran*. Most scholars agree that Jerome continued the intention of the original passage. His colorful translation was deeply imbedded in the iconography of Christian art by the time of Michelangelo’s work in the sixteenth century.

Tourists viewing the sculpture today in the Church of S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, are sometimes told that it depicts an angry Moses who has just descended from the mountain to confront the people worshipping the golden calf. This is a misunderstanding based on viewing the work out of its original context. Michelangelo’s initial commission was to sculpt thirty larger-than-life-size figures for Pope Julius’ three-story tomb in St. Peter’s basilica. When the tomb was scaled down and relocated after the Pope’s death, Michelangelo finished only three sculptures. *Moses*, intended for the tomb’s second story, was to be seen from below by the viewer. Today, however, the work is viewed on the ground level of the revised monument completed in 1545. *Moses*’ torso is proportionally too long when viewed on eye level, and this makes the figure appear menacing. No wonder overzealous, but misinformed, tour guides interpret *Moses* in the context of the leader fiercely engaging the sinful Israelites, instead of the holder of the tablets of the law looking towards the people with prophetic inspiration.

Moses depicts the powerful elderly prophet who had learned much from his experience with God over the years, yet would have greater adventures ahead as the leader of the wilderness generation. Michelangelo’s *Moses* retains the strength and fortitude necessary for these post-Mount Sinai challenges.