There is something awe-inspiring about Michelangelo’s Moses. The body ripples with barely-suppressed motion. The right leg projects forward, as though the prophet were ready to rise from his seat. One massive hand clutches the tablets of the Law. The other rests uneasily in the living coils of the beard. The expression is troubled, unreadable; and the eyes have seen God.

The Moses was sculpted for the tomb of Pope Julius II, a project that spanned Michelangelo’s long career in Rome. When it was commissioned, he was thirty years old, a young Florentine newly famous for his Pieta. By the time it was finally installed, he was seventy, and nearing the end of the most brilliant artistic career in the history of Western Art. He spent most of the intervening four decades in Rome, where he became the central figure of the High Renaissance.

Of course, neither Michelangelo nor the Renaissance originated in Rome.

The Renaissance began in the prosperous cities of Tuscany, where a rising merchant class had the money and social ambition to consume literature and commission art on an unprecedented scale. The literature and art created to meet this demand was inspired by the ancient world, which was seen as a repository of secular values distinct from, if not necessarily opposed to, the Christian ethos. Informed by careful study of ancient models, painting and sculpture become increasingly accomplished and expressive.

Florence was central to these developments. The city had an exceptionally large and wealthy merchant class, preeminent in the wool industry and banking. In the early fifteenth century, the greatest members of its mercantile oligarchy, the Medici family, established a sort of informal autocracy characterized by enlightened patronage of scholars and artists. Thus it was that, in 1489, the most famous of the Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent, took into his household a young but obviously gifted sculptor named Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Michelangelo had been born in 1475 to a Florentine family of modest means. At age 13, against his father’s wishes, he entered a painter’s workshop, where he showed such promise that he attracted Lorenzo’s attention. For three years, the young sculptor was practically part of the Medici family, eating meals with the household, studying the ancient sculptures Lorenzo had collected, and producing a number of small but precocious reliefs. Lorenzo’s premature death and subsequent political unrest, however, forced Michelangelo to leave Florence in search of new patrons.

Michelangelo arrived in Rome for the first time in 1496, commissioned by a cardinal to sculpt the statue of Bacchus now in the Bargello. He made his reputation with his next work, the famous Pieta, completed when he was 24. After this triumph, he returned to Florence, where he sculpted the David, the Bruges Madonna, and a series of lesser works. But in 1505, he was called back to Rome, this time to create a tomb of unprecedented splendor for the new pope, Julius II.

To understand why a pope saw fit to commission a gargantuan tomb from Italy’s finest sculptor, we need to briefly discuss the nature of the Renaissance papacy.
Most Renaissance popes behaved more like secular lords than spiritual leaders. In part, this was a consequence of their political position. The popes directly governed a large swath of territory in central Italy, and understood the defense – and if possible, expansion – of the Papal States as among their foremost responsibilities. This circumstance was aggravated by the fact that most Renaissance popes came from, or sought to establish, noble families. Rampant nepotism was an almost inevitable consequence. More fortunately for posterity, so was generous patronage of the arts. Like the political elites they fought and imitated, many Renaissance popes understood patronage as a means of demonstrating wealth and culture, and thus of gaining prestige. As a result, Rome became Italy’s greatest center of artistic production in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the period known as the High Renaissance.

The artistic preeminence of Rome in this period was largely a testament to the ambitions and energy of Pope Julius II. Julius, born Giuliano della Rovere, owed his rise through the church hierarchy quite literally to nepotism: his uncle, Pope Sixtus IV, had made him a cardinal when he was in his twenties. A skilled diplomat, Julius seems to have always been more comfortable at the negotiating table than at the altar; and once he bribed his way into the papacy, his chief priority was always to maintain the integrity and power of the Papal States. In the pursuit of this aim, he encountered two obstacles: Cesare Borgia, and Venice.

Cesare Borgia was the son of the Julius’ predecessor, Pope Alexander VI. Even by the lax standards of the Renaissance papacy, Alexander was an egregious nepotist. Though far from the only pope to have a mistress and children, Alexander was the only pope bold enough to legitimize his children, of whom he had at least five. The most notorious members of this brood were Lucretia and Cesare. Lucretia was married off to a series of noble husbands. Cesare was initially made a cardinal at age 18. A few years later, however, he resigned his cardinalate and was made commander of the papal armies and lord of a duchy detached from the Papal States. In this capacity, he proved remarkably unscrupulous and strikingly successful – Machiavelli praised him as the ideal general and statesman. He met his match for ruthlessness, however, in Pope Julius II, who betrayed him to the King of Spain and reintegrated his territories into the Papal States.

Julius then set his sights on the Venetians, who had seized a number of cities belonging to the Papal States. Lacking the strength to attack Venice independently, he created the League of Cambrai, an alliance with France, the Holy Roman Empire, and Spain with the sole purpose of dismembering the Venetian state. This aim it swiftly achieved, and Julius forced the Venetians to beg for absolution before ending the conflict. In keeping with the fickle nature of Renaissance politics, however, Julius would reverse his policy within a few years, ally himself with Venice, and personally lead an army against the French.

In the meantime, as part of his program to enhance the power and prestige of the papacy, Julius undertook to embellish Rome with the works of the finest artists and architects in Italy. To that end, he hired the 25-year old Raffaello Sanzio – better known as Raphael – to fresco his private library in the Vatican. The young artist produced four brilliant frescoes – the most famous is the School of Athens – whose effortless marriage of classical style and Christian meaning epitomizes the spirit of the High Renaissance. Delighted with these compositions, Julius
commissioned Raphael and his growing workshop to fresco a series of other rooms in the papal apartments, now famous as the Stanze.

Julius had even more ambitious plans for the Basilica of St. Peter’s next door. The church, constructed by Constantine, was in an advanced state of decay. Rather than simply renovate it, however, Julius decided to replace the ancient building with a grandiose new church consonant with the glory of his papacy and the tenor of Renaissance architecture.

The architecture of the Italian Renaissance was founded on creative imitation of Roman architecture. Via extant ruins and the treatise of Vitruvius, Roman architecture supplied an impressive array of models and precedents, which Renaissance architects adapted to a world very different from that of the Empire. Perhaps the most characteristic Renaissance buildings are palazzi – the imposing town houses of the commercial elites whose wealth and ambitions defined the era. These were men eager to advertise their status; and as products of a society that regarded classical learning as the standard of culture, they commissioned houses inspired by the antique.

The most imposing achievements of Renaissance architecture, however, were religious buildings. Churches epitomized the problems of adapting classical forms to unclassical uses. Although the basilica was an ancient building type, it was a utilitarian one, considerably less elaborate and imposing than the temples that were the true prestige buildings of antiquity. And so, eager to rival the greatest achievements of ancient architecture, Renaissance architects sought to incorporate elements of Roman temples, baths, and palaces into their church designs. They found further inspiration in early Christian architecture, which provided additional models for imitation. The buildings of Donato Bramante indicate how fruitful such imitation could be.

Bramante began his career as a painter. Inspired, however, by the awesome cathedral of Milan, he became increasingly interested in architecture. In the 1480s and 90s, he undertook a series of commissions to remodel Milanese churches, in which he drew upon his knowledge of Roman ruins and Milan’s stock of late antique religious buildings to create a series of impressive, centrally-planned spaces. After Bramante came to Rome in 1499, he applied the same approach to the diminutive building known as the Tempietto, a perfectly symmetrical monument marking the spot traditionally associated with the crucifixion of St. Peter. This structure, inspired by ancient and early Christian precedents, epitomizes the principles that Bramante would apply a few years later, on a vastly larger scale, in the rotunda of the new St. Peter’s Basilica.

Pope Julius chose Bramante as his architect on the strength of the plan he submitted for the new St. Peter’s. Since the time of Constantine, most Christian churches had been – as you know – basilicas: rectangular buildings with an apse for the altar at one short end. Bramante, however, proposed to construct a centrally-planned, perfectly symmetrical building on the model of the Tempietto. Although he had perfectly respectable Christian antecedents for this design in martyrria, the centrally-planned shrines built over the tombs of saints in late antiquity, his plan is best understood as a fully-integrated fusion of ancient Roman and early Christian precedents.

Julius agreed to this radical reconstruction of Rome’s greatest church at least partly because he believed that it would provide a suitably grandiose setting for his own tomb. He envisioned a colossal marble monument decorated with dozens of statues; and in the midst, his own
sarcophagus, borne by mourning angels. He could think of only one sculptor worthy of such a commission: Michelangelo Buonarroti.

The tomb Julius commissioned Michelangelo to create was to be a gargantuan freestanding structure, three stories tall and decorated with no fewer than 47 life-sized or larger sculptures. See the photo essay on toldinstone.com for a detailed description. Michelangelo immediately set out for the Carrara quarries to select marble for the project; but before he could begin work on the sculptures, Julius ordered him to undertake a series of other projects, most notably the famous ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. This enormous undertaking, which Michelangelo carried out alone, without even assistants to grind his colors, monopolized the artist’s time for four years. But almost as soon he finished the ceiling, in October 1512, he returned to the long-neglected tomb project, and began work on the first three statues: the so-called rebellious and dying captives (both in the Louvre), and the Moses.

The Moses is considerably larger than life-size. It was designed to be placed on the second level of Julius’ tomb, thirteen feet above the ground, where it was to join equally imposing statues of St. Paul, the Active Life, and the Contemplative Life. This scheme, however, was not destined for fruition. After Julius died in 1513, Michelangelo signed a new contract with the pope’s heirs, which outlined a somewhat smaller but still imposing tomb. A few years later, however, he was forced to sign a third contract for a radically reduced design. Michelangelo continued to work on sculptures for the tomb for the next three decades, but few of these were finished, and only the Moses would be installed in final, rather pitiful, version of Julius’ tomb.

Julius had intended for his tomb to be erected beneath the rotunda of the new St. Peter’s Basilica. But in the end – both because St. Peter’s was still decades from completion and because no subsequent pope saw any reason to indulge a dead man’s megalomania – it was placed in San Pietro in Vincoli, which had been Julius’ titular church when he was a cardinal. And there it stands today. Julius would have fumed to know how his heirs had squandered the talents of one of history’s greatest artists. But I imagine he would appreciate the fact, thanks to Michelangelo, his tomb still managed to become a tourist attraction.