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'Lost Michelangelo' bobs up near Niagara

An unfinished painting of the Virgin Mary and Christ being attributed to the great Italian master has been found in the United States

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An

The Pietà de Ragusa was once knocked off the wall by a tennis ball (Handout)

unfinished painting of the Virgin Mary and Christ owned by a former pilot living near Niagara Falls is a lost masterpiece by Michelangelo, according to a biographer of the Renaissance artist.

If the attribution is confirmed, the work will rank alongside only three surviving panel paintings by the Italian master, potentially making it worth more than the record £73m so far achieved for a work of art.

Antonio Forcellino, an art historian and restorer who has worked on Michelangelo's masterpieces, first came across the Pietà, a 25in x 19in oil painting on a panel made of fir, when he was contacted by email by its American owner.

He has since spent five years seeking documentary evidence in Europe and examining the painting at its current location in Buffalo.

"The first time I saw it, I was so struck by the strength of it that I felt breathless," said Forcellino, an Italian. "Only a genius could have painted this — the darkness which underscores the suffering, the Virgin who looks as if she's screaming and the figure of Christ after he has been deposed from the cross. It's small, but the technique is extraordinary.

"It's definitely by Michelangelo, and I was lucky to find documents that prove it. The x-rays that have been done are key. They reveal his changes of mind; he moved the face of Christ, covered up grass to the left of the Virgin, and left an area next to her right leg unfinished. It couldn't possibly be a copy by another artist."

In a new book out in Italy, *La Pietà Perduta* (The Lost Pietà), which will be published in Britain next year, Forcellino argues that the painting was created in 1545 by Michelangelo — best known for his frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and his sculpture of David in Florence — and was first mentioned in records in May 1546.

In a letter held at the Vatican's secret library, Cardinal Reginald Pole, a cousin of Henry VIII and later Archbishop of Canterbury, offered it to Ercole Gonzaga, an Italian cardinal.

Subsequent owners included a baron who was honorary Prussian consul in Dubrovnik, Croatia, and a German baroness who left it to her lady-in-waiting, Gertrude Young, when she died. When Young passed away in 1905, the painting remained with her brother-in-law — the current owner's great-grandfather who had settled in America.

A previous attribution by Forcellino won the support of his colleagues. In 1999, he identified a previously unrecognised Michelangelo masterpiece in a statue of Pope Julius II, who commissioned the artist to paint the Sistine Chapel, at the pontiff's tomb in the church of St Peter in Chains in Rome.

The owner of the Pietà will only allow Forcellino to reveal his first name, Martin. In his book, Forcellino offers a few clues to his identity; he is tall and blue-eyed and a women's magazine once voted him one of America's 100 most desirable bachelors.

Martin told *The Sunday Times* in an email that he grew up with the Pietà hanging in the family home. It once crashed to the ground when it was hit by a tennis ball he and his brothers were playing with, but was undamaged.

The family always believed the painting — which they affectionately called "the Mike" — was by Michelangelo and when his parents gave it to him nine years ago, Martin investigated its history.

"As I did this, my belief in the painting grew," he said. "I've retraced all the steps in this story, from Rome to Dubrovnik to Germany and to the USA."

William E Wallace, professor of art history at Washington University in St Louis and a leading authority on Michelangelo, said he was "cautiously optimistic" that the Pietà could be by the artist. He said: "I've seen the documentation that Martin and Forcellino have put together and it's extremely impressive. The history is almost unbroken. Renaissance paintings aren't usually that well documented."

Martin plans to have it restored and displayed at exhibitions in Florence and Rome next year. Asked whether he would keep the Pietà, sell it or give it to a museum, the owner was non-committal. "Time will tell what will happen," he said. In the meantime, Martin has placed the painting in a bank vault.

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