

Study for the Head of Leda

During the siege of Florence, Michelangelo painted a large picture in tempera representing the mythological encounter between Leda and Jupiter in the form of a swan. In it he also depicted the egg, the fruit of this licentious intercourse, from which the divine twins Castor and Pollux were born. The client was the Duke of Ferrara but, as the result of a tactless act on the part of his emissary, he never received the work. Instead, Michelangelo gave it to his friend and assistant Antonio Mini in order to raise a dowry for his two sisters. The painting, which later went to France, has been lost, perhaps destroyed because of its immoral message. The composition, which showed Leda in the same pose as the *Night* in the Medici Chapels, is known through several copies, including one attributed to Rosso Fiorentino and now in the National Gallery in London. It is also reproduced in contemporary engravings, such as the one by Beatrizet that illustrates the original work in detail. A preparatory drawing for the head of Leda by Michelangelo himself has survived. It was clearly made from life of a male model and documents the common Renaissance practice of using male models, often the apprentices who worked in the artists' studios, to portray women.