Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling: a portrait of the Renaissance

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Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling:
A Portrait of the Renaissance

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CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Religious and Philosophical Concepts 4
   Neo-platonism 4
   Ficino 6
   Pico 8
   Humanism 9
   Savonarola 10

Ceiling Scheme 11
   The Histories 11
   The Prophets and Sybils 21
   The Pendentives 22

The Human Body 22

External Struggles and Internal Contradiction 25

Conclusion 29

Bibliography 32
Michelangelo Buonarrotti's fame so impressed Pope Julius II that in 1506 he asked Michelangelo to fresco the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Though Michelangelo was mainly interested in creating large marble statues, his consistent creative energy led him to become a great painter. Michelangelo reluctantly accepted the challenge of the Sistine Ceiling. He looked at the ceiling project as a trick to rob him of a great commission. Michelangelo was far more interested in completing the commission of the grand and powerful work of Julius' tomb. Julius had commissioned a funeral monument on which Michelangelo was going to include forty marble statues. When Julius insisted, however, the artist set to work on the ceiling with characteristic vigor. "The extraordinary Pope was to be the all protective, all-loving patron and in return Michelangelo was to achieve immortal recognition for the Pope through the unrivaled majesty ... [of] the Sistine Chapel."1 In his sixth sonnet Michelangelo speaks of his relationship with his patron Pope Julius II:

I am your faithful servant, as of old;  
I am to you as the sun's rays are his.

The chapel was originally built by Sixtus IV as part of a campaign to restore Rome after the decay and dilapidations of the long Avignon exile. The building of the chapel, having begun in 1475, was dedicated to the Virgin of the Assumption on August 15, 1483. The original ceiling was blue with gold stars and geometrical designs. The ceiling was in need of repainting because in

1504 it had developed a large crack in the vault. A new subject matter was implemented because "for Pope Julius it was also extremely conservative; it belonged to the gothic past, and Julius was involved in creating the future."2

After many quarrels Michelangelo was forced to return to Rome to begin the commission which was originally proposed in 1506. Plans for the frescoes had been interrupted by disputes between Michelangelo and the Pope, but were resumed after a reconciliation in Bologna. In Bologna, Michelangelo had studied the figures of Jacopo della Quercia on the doors of San Petronio. These bas reliefs influenced the biblical subjects which Michelangelo treated in the ceiling. Julius II had recommended that Michelangelo paint the twelve apostles on the ceiling. Michelangelo, believing that it would be "a poor thing," told the Pope that it was an inadequate choice "because they [the Apostles] were poor too."3 After voicing his opinion, the Pope left the conception for the design of the ceiling entirely up to Michelangelo.

It seems unlikely that Michelangelo developed the entire scheme on his own without any religious advisors. Because the documents concerning the ceiling were destroyed in the 1527 Sack of Rome, the actual advisors, if there were any, are unknown. It has been suggested that Michelangelo could have been advised by


various theologians. These theologians include Egidrus of Viterbo, who besides being Julius' favorite preacher, was the prior general of the Augustinians, and knowledgeable of classical and biblical learning. A second possibility, Santi Pagnini, was a prior of San Marco in Florence, a disciple of Savonarola and a biblical scholar. It has also been proposed that Michelangelo's theological advisor was Marco Vigerio della Rovere who published Christian Decachord in 1507. Because Michelangelo's advisors are unknown, it is extremely difficult to trace the theology and politics which lie behind the Sistine ceiling. One consistency is that "Michelangelo made art the vehicle of lofty and soul-shaking thought."4

The Sistine Ceiling exudes the spirit of varying influences. The ceiling can be interpreted through the teachings of Neoplatonism, Dominican preachings of Savonarola and Pagnini, and the Renaissance humanist ideals of Viterbo. "The Sistine Ceiling breathes a spirit of Old Testament propheticism and Greek nudity, a plastic expression of Hebraism, the redemptive preachments of Savonarola, and the fragments of classic art then being excavated in Rome."5 Other influential figures in Michelangelo's religious beliefs include Saint Philip Neri, St. Ignatious Loyola, and St. Charles Borromeo. Michelangelo, a devout and practicing catho-


lic, used a combination of mythology, philosophy, and the Old Testament in his work.

Religious and Philosophical Concepts

Neo-platonism

Neo-platonistic theologians would say that it was only fitting that Michelangelo painted frescoes which depicted the elevation of the soul in a chapel dedicated to the Assumption. "This conception of the ascension from the bodily prison to the innate freedom of the soul is one of the favorite themes of platonic literature of the Renaissance."6 The divine origin of the human soul is manifest in these Platonic theories.

In the histories of the creation above the clergy the Platonic conception of the ritorno a Dio, deificatio or remanatio of the soul is deepened. Man in his purest form is directed backwards to a materially expressed form in the Creation of Eve. "As a matter of fact, in the last five frescoes of the ceiling above the Presbyterium one can see that for Michelangelo the ascension is but the progressive deification of man, that is the realization of his highest innate faculties."7 In the Middle Ages, the conception of the mystical ascension of the soul was a nonexistence of the human personality in God. Therefore the scheme of the ceiling was broadened by philosophical understanding of the human existence which was not derived from the

7 Ibid., p. 43.
teachings of the Church or those of the Middle Ages but from the practiced Platonic philosophy of the period. The theory of ascension provides visual and spiritual unity to the spectator who enters at the opposite end of the sequence. "By beginning in reverse order with the Drunkeness of Noah and ending over the altar with the Separation of Light from Darkness Michelangelo gave visual expression to Neo-platonic notion popular in the Renaissance - that life should be a journey from slavery of the body to liberation of the soul in God."8 The series of frescoes discloses the idea of Deificatio or Ritorno which was ever-present in Neo-platonic philosophies of the Renaissance.

Michelangelo's knowledge of Neo-platonic philosophies came from his experiences in the court of Lorenzo de Medici. His work won the favor of Lorenzo who invited him to live in his palace and to study the Greek statues in the Medici garden. While living in the palace, Michelangelo sat at the same table with such Platonic philosophers as Ficino, Pico, and Poliziano-taking in the dialogues on Plato and the recitation of the poetry of Greece. It seems highly probable that these exchanges influenced Michelangelo to incorporate the "Neo-platonic idea that God's image is reflected in man in different degrees."9 According to DeTolnay these degrees are arranged like the zones of the ceiling. The first degree is God's revelation and the first men


as seen in the histories. The second is those with spiritual power: the prophets and sybils. The third degree is that of the ancestors of Christ involved in the incarnation found in the lunettes and spandrals.

This theory correlates with Ficino's theory of the universe. Ficino "inherited from his Neo-platonic and medieval sources the conception of the universe as a great hierarchy in which each being occupies its place and has its degree of perfection, beginning with God at the top, descending through the orders of angels and souls the celestial and elementary spheres, the various species of animals, plants and minerals, down to shapeless prime matter."10 The writings of Marsilio Ficino, especially his major work Platonic Theology of 1469-1474, present a complex arrangement of philosophical ideas enhanced by similes and allegories, and by favorite quotations. Ample evidence of his widespread influence can be deduced by the long lists of persons with whom he kept correspondences and from the printed editions of his manuscript.

Ficino's hierarchy of the five basic substances differs from Plotonius. This was done to increase its symmetry and to attribute greater importance to the human soul. According to Ficino, "the soul is really the meaning of all things created by

This scheme gives the soul "a kind of metaphysical setting and sanction to the doctrine of the dignity of man, a doctrine inherited from his humanist predecessors." The order is God, the angelic mind, the rational soul, quality, and body. To Ficino the soul is an extender, it combines, yet is the center, of all things and continues to possess the forces of all. "Therefore it may be rightly called the center of nature, the middle term of all things, the bond and juncture of the universe."

Ficino believed that the ultimate goal of human life and existence was to partake in an immediate enlightenment and vision of God. Therefore, earthly life is a gradual elevation of the soul through higher levels of truth and being culminating in this greater vision and knowledge of God. Though Ficino never claims to have attained this state himself, he was convinced that it could be reached during living life. This goal to ascend to the vision and enjoyment of God was accomplished by many, otherwise man's effort would be in vain; man would be like animals and this would not be consistent with man's position on the universe. Since the real goal was to attain the vision and love of God, human life was in preparation for this divine love. Ficino placed a greater importance on will and love than on intellect and knowledge. Thought and love have a greater influence on

11 Ibid., p. 42.
12 Ibid., p. 42.
13 Ibid., p. 43.
"love, according to Plato's symposium, is an active force that binds all things together."\(^{14}\)

The concept of immortality had a great impression on those of the sixteenth century. "For Ficino's whole interpretation of human life as a contemplative ascent toward God would lose its meaning unless this ascent were to find its permanent fulfillment in the external afterlife of the immortal soul."\(^{15}\) In 1512, at the Lateran Council, the immortality of the soul was formally pronounced a dogma of the Catholic Church.

Ficino was convinced that religion (Christianity) and philosophy (Platonism) could coexist in harmony. It was the task of the Platonistic philosophy to confirm Christian faith while it was the labor of religion to benefit philosophy.

A friend of Ficino's, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's goal was to reconcile Platonism and Aristotelism. Pico was rescued from imprisonment by Lorenzo de Medici. His theories are in sync with the Medici circle and Platonic Academy and even with Savonarola. Pico's "Oration on the Dignity of Man" is a Renaissance, Neo-platonic approach to God and knowledge. Pico's foundation was that the "progression of the ascent... is one from materiality to the highest spirituality."\(^{16}\) The scenes in the Sistine Ceiling may reflect "the ascent of the soul in the hier-

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 43.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 46.

archy of being as it was outlined by Ficino and Pico.\textsuperscript{17} These theories had a pervasive influence on the art and literature of the period, and Michelangelo had grown up in the Florentine circle where Neo-platonic ideas of the soul and of love and of the relationship between man and the divine were most developed and most widely circulated.\textsuperscript{18}

Humanism

Like the Neo-platonists, the Humanists believed that the life and world of God were attainable by the human. The Humanists also had an interest in combining philosophical and religious truths in a single universal truth. During the first half of the fifteenth century, Humanism met the social and political needs of the Italiens through a new expression of man. A major tenet of Humanism was the importance of the individual man and his earthly affairs. Humanism is an attitude toward life that centers on man and the opportunities for a full and rich life available to him here on earth. Greeks and Romans had a similar viewpoint. They, too, centered their interests on human activities and achievements. It is not surprising that great Humanists of the Renaissance carefully studied literature and art of Greeks and Romans in order to gain inspiration for their works. The growth of Humanism cannot totally be placed on the discovery of Antiquity because that interest had always been

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 241.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 241.
developing. Through the domination of the Medici, the participation in Humanism by the citizens of Italy was reduced. Its importance continued to wane at the end of the century with Italy's external struggles with France and Spain. Despite this decrease in participation, the Humanist outlook shaped the thinking of many artists.

The Sistine Ceiling "is the most representative work of this period. The philosophic and religious beliefs of Humanism found in its most perfect artistic embodiment: the conception of earthly beauty as a manifestation of the divine idea, the belief in the inner renovation of the human soul which is of divine nature, and the belief of the possibility of its return to God (deification). It is the greatest Summa of the life ideals of Humanism, the perfect compendium of the artistic, philosophic and poetic tendencies of time, a veritable Divina Comedia of the Renaissance - as unique and representative as Dante's poetry was for his age."19 The Sistine Ceiling can be interpreted as an expression of spiritual power and Humanist philosophy.

Savonarola

At the same time as Michelangelo was being exposed to the ideals of Neo-platonism and Humanism, he was hearing the preachings of Savonarola. Savonarola was a Dominican monk who aroused the religious emotions of the Florentines. He denounced the despotism and the materialism of the Medici rule. Between 1497-
1498, Savonarola led the burning of things which he deemed unacceptable: fancy masks, fine clothes, dice, musical instruments, books and paintings. Savonarola "used his rugged eloquence and prophecy to arouse fundamental religious emotions that never die... he swayed not only uncultured proletarians, but some of the greatest artists and soundest bourgeois in Florence."20 Upon hearing the preachings of Savonarola "in the Duomo and the Cloister of S. Marco another portion of his [Michelangelo's] soul was touched, and he acquired that deep and religious tone which gives its majesty and terror to the Sistine."21 When Michelangelo returned from Bologna in 1494, after the fall of the Medici, Florence was under the rule of Savonarola. Savonarola persuaded Florence to set up a republic based on the pre-Medici Florence; an aristocratically led moral democracy. Savonarola failed to recapture the old Florence. He was hung and burned on May 23, 1498. Even after his death, Michelangelo continued to read his sermons, which, in turn, led to his study of the Old Testament.

Ceiling Schemes

The Histories

Michelangelo covered the center portion of the ceiling with nine panels which tell a summary history of Genesis. In three panel groupings, he begins with the creation of the world, followed by the creation of mankind, and ending by the origin of sin


21 Symonds, p. 284.
and its consequences. Originally there was a screen in the chapel which separated the clergy from laymen. This screen indicates a second division of the nine panels. Michelangelo reserved the first four panels for the history of man: the temptation, fall, punishment and repentance. "At the point of junction between the presbytery and the world, comes the creation of Eve, shuddering from the side of the unconscious Adam to a life which enables Sin and Punishment to enter the world, to set it on the path which leads to the Divine anger of the Deluge and the Survival of the tiny nucleus which has escaped the general degradation but which itself immediately falls into Sin, and in the drunkeness of Noah and the mockery of his impious sons completes the tragedy of the degeneration of mankind."22 The last five panels, which are above the section for the clergy, depict the creation of the story of God. These nine histories have appeared in relief representations of the early Renaissance, but the Sistine Ceiling is the first time they have appeared in such magnitude.

These Old Testament scenes were the completion of a historical scheme of decoration for the chapel as a whole. Michelangelo united the Quattrocento frescoes of the chapel walls by painting the nine histories. On the left wall was the era of humanity sub lege: the life of Moses as a prophet and law giver of the people in the Old Testament. On the right wall was humanity sub gratia:

the life of Christ as saviour and redeemer in the New Testament. Michelangelo could only complete the two works by doing their prelude: the history of the world ante legum. Michelangelo worked out a scheme earlier than the Moses cycle and represented "the world ante legum from the first day of creation to man's degradation in sin which made both the law and salvation necessary."23 The imagery of the ceiling is "seen as a bridge between the old and the new, between the word and the spirit, just as if it were a physical union in the architecture, linking the walls of the chapel."24

In the first three panels above the altar Michelangelo has depicted the creation of the world as God created it in six days. In his narration Michelangelo omits the creation of the stars (the fourth day), the creation of the fishes and birds (the fifth day), and the creation of the beasts, reptiles and animals (the sixth day). It has been proposed that the God of the Genesis series is reminiscent of Julius II; Julius had the same venerable beard and furrowed brow. The Lord is represented with his hands outstretched in gestures of creation, perhaps similar to Julius' gesture when indicating the painting of the vault.

In the first panel, God is Separating Light from Darkness. God is depicted "with arms raised like those of the priest at

23 Ibid., p. 66.

the consecration of the Host, the Lord shows his plan for human salvation as pre-existent from the moment in which he separated the light from darkness." 25 In this panel above the altar, the creator who extends beyond the architectural frame seems to be upholding the weight of the world, indicating a scene of judgement.

After creating the land with a sense of omnipotence, God takes an active part in Creating the Sun, Moon, and Plants. Michelangelo disregards iconographic and symbolic tradition and personifies these cosmic forces. There is a sense of violence in his creation of these forces; the foreshortening in God's right arm indicates a fast movement: God's right hand points to the sun while his left develops the moon. A little angel hides his face and clings to the cloak of God in hopes of protecting itself from the wrath of the moon. God then turns to create the plants and grasses.

Again Michelangelo renders God's omnipotent powers in the Separation of the Land and the Waters. God commands the waters to "bring forth all kinds of creatures that are nourished by the element." 26

The next three panels depict the creation and fall of man. In these panels "man moves into a more direct relationship with divine poser, one more clearly integrated into a mystical cycle.


26 Seymour, p. 180.
of the recognizable and incomprehensible."27 "Of the whole story of the creation of the first man and woman, and for him [Michelangelo] at least, feebly, the creation of light. It belongs to the quality of his genius thus to concern itself almost exclusively with the making of man. For him it is not, as in the story itself, the last and crowning act of a series of developments, but the first and unique act, the creation of life itself in its supreme form, off hand, and immediately, in the cold lifeless stone."28

God Creating Man or Adam is an example of Michelangelo's glorification of the human form. The depiction of perfection both moral and physical was looked upon as a means of approaching the divine. God's arm reaches to Adam in perhaps an imparting of wisdom; one "expects to see him rise not only endowed with the form of God, but with intelligence and mental power."29 The convex, explosive and paternal form of God contrasts with the concave, receptive and impotent form of Adam, yet "the bodies themselves are complementary; the concave body of Adam fitting the convex body of the Lord."30 By placing Adam on a rock, where only shades of brown differentiate flesh and earth, a suggestion


28 Seymour, p. 162.

29 Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, Michael Angelo Buonarrotti (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911), p. 64.

of God as a sculptor is made. The roles of Michelangelo and God emerge as creators. "In that languid figure [Adam], there is something rude or satyr-like, something akin to the rugged hillside on which it lies. His whole form is gathered into an expression of mere expectancy and reception; he has hardly strength enough to lift his finger to touch the finger of the Creator; yet a touch of the finger-tips will suffice."31 Symbolic of the omnipotence of God are the little genii behind Him, yet he is dependent on these creatures to carry out his mission in his effortless position. The fate of humanity is manifested in the creation of this first man.

God seems to be brooding in His Creation of Eve, perhaps aware of the consequences of His act. "The standing immobile God of Eve, who derives from an earlier Renaissance tradition, is timid and uninteresting in contrast to the soaring God of Adam."32 It is as though God could not get excited about creating Eve. When God bids her to arise she comes forward half stumbling, half wondering and half crying; "dependence upon her creator's movement is made manifest, while there is infinite beauty in her wondering gesture as she arises, a gesture which becomes the act of adoration."33 Many scholars believe that the birth of Eve symbolizes the birth of the church.

31 Seymour, pp. 162-163.
32 Liebert, p. 159.
33 Seymour, p. 179.
Instead of rendering the subjects of the Temptation and the Expulsion separately Michelangelo has united the subjects by a tree: "in a single over-arching shape the crime leads to the punishment." The left portion of the tree, on the temptation side, is a fig tree while that on the right is an oak tree. Rovere, the family name of Sixtus IV and Julius II means oak. The devil is seen in the upper portion of the tree while a serpent is coiled around the rest. Paradise is not depicted, only a few rocks and trees. But after the sin Adam and Eve are driven into an even emptier world which is bleak and inhospitable. According to the bible it is the woman who reaches for the fruit but in Michelangelo's painting Adam does not refuse participation in the first sin. When reaching for the fruit Adam and Eve are coordinated in their motion indicating a union. After the fall the figures are no longer united but are at awkward and clumsy angles to each other. "Adam flees, pursued not by the angel but by his own inner remorse; the movement of his arms is a form of defense against the furies of his own remorse... in his sorrow he has become a moral being where as Eve has kept her feline character." In the earlier eager gesture and voluptuous pose of Eve, "Michelangelo has given his finest conception of a woman; not the heavy limbed, weary-eyed type that rests on the tomb of the medici, but a woman in all her grace, in

34 Hartt, p. 502.

35 DeTolnay, p. 133.
all her beauty of form and feature."36 This depiction of women contrasts greatly with Eve's anguished recognition of their trespass. "Instead of merely illustrating the biblical story, Michelangelo remolded it to incarnate the fundamental truth which it expresses."37 In the Renaissance man becomes aware of his own choice between good and evil.

The final three figures which are placed over the congregation tell the story of the origin of sin. Michelangelo placed the Sacrifice of Noah before rather than after The Deluge since The Deluge required the only large field available to the story of Noah. "The spiritual meaning of the Genesis scenes, [DeTolnay] believes, requires a reversal of their order to create a Platonic ascent from the Drunkeness of Noah to the first acts of creation."38 Michelangelo associates the scenes of Noah with the fate of humanity rather than with redemption. "The Drunkeness of Noah is the Prelude: in the figure of the aged Titan the tragedy of Human existence is manifest. In The Deluge, the transcience of the whole human race became visible. In the Sacrifice of Noah the aged Noah has become aware of the tragedy of man through his experience; on the other hand the young people are oblivious to this law of existence. In the last painting over the room of the

36 Gower, p. 64.
37 DeTolnay, p. 31.
laymen the realm of fate is replaced by the realm of nature. In
the fall and expulsion man appears integrated in nature. 39

"The story of Noah begins like that of Adam, with a scene
that expresses devotion to God: the sacrifice is the sign of
righteous devotion." 40 The Sacrifice of Noah "shows man awaken-
ing to a sense of his divine soul and the beginning of the con-
tact through a sacrifice between man and God." 41 This panel
could be representative of the sacrifice of Christ.

In The Deluge "Michelangelo's intention was to reveal in a
general way the hopeless struggle of the primitive human race
against its fate." 42 In earlier representations of The Deluge
the raging elements are depicted, but Michelangelo depicts a
composition of people clamoring for refuge from the storm.
Michelangelo knew the feeling of disorder, he had fled the cala-
mity that Savonarola had depicted in his sermons. Savonarola
had prophesied the invasion of Charles VIII and the French
armies, decreeing that it was a punishment for the sins of Italy
and the degeneration of the Church. "Signs of particular sins of
self-love appear in the fighting groups in the open boat, the
struggle outside the ark and the attempt to break into it, the
apathy and despair of the figures under the tent, and concern for
material goods in the people carrying bundles of possessions up

39 DeTolnay, p. 31.
40 Dotson, p. 235.
41 Golmore, p. 24.
42 DeTolnay, p. 22.
the gill at the left."43 These figures contrast with those who have good impulses in a time of disaster: men, women and children embracing and the father carrying the body of his dead son. The Deluge "symbolizes the helplessness of primitive humanity before the light of grace has shown upon it."44 Present in the foreground are the lovers who cannot be married and the children who cannot be baptized or confirmed. These figures may have been included as a reminder of Julius II's dreaded imposition of the interdict on Venice on April 27, 1509. The green tree which represents the tree of knowledge "gives meaning to the groups of helpless men, women and children struggling to save themselves and their household goods from the waters."45 In the background a dove flutters from the ark indicating God's protection. According to St. Augustine and the theologians, including Savonarola, the ark is a symbol of the cross and the mystical body of Christ, the Eucharist.

The Drunkeness of Noah is a representation "of the imprisonment of the soul in the material condition of the body and of life on earth."46 "The Drunkeness of Noah became for him a symbol of the servitude of human life."47 Michelangelo has made a new interpretation by placing Noah in a desert rather than in a

43 Dotson, p. 235.
45 Hartt, p. 502.
47 DeTolnay, p. 24.
vineyard, as he is in Genesis. The vision of Noah in a desert better depicts the solitary toil of man.

The paintings of the Sistine Ceiling told the biblical story of the world from the creation to the flood. Aside from Michelangelo's deviations from the Genesis he "was claiming his right at the outset to tell his storied by means of nude figures. Thus, the ceiling is an inseparable amalgam of the biblical texts of Genesis, the sin and fall of man, the foretelling of redemption and Michelangelo's own imagination."48

Prophets and Sybils

Around the nine panels depicting man, who is made, who then sins and in turn requires redemption by Christ "are those who foretell man's redemption by the Son of Man, alternating Prophets of the Old Testament and sybils of classical antiquity."49 These prophets and sybils reside in triangular spaces around the histories. The remainder of the ceiling is crowded with large colossal figures. Therefore the ceiling as a whole can be divided into three zones. The first, making up the lunettes and spandrals, pictures a colossal race partaking in the customary vicissitudes of the human condition. The second zone is the architectural skeleton in which Michelangelo has placed the prophets and sybils who echo the spirituality of the human race but share the intellectual and emotional faculties of the Divine.

48 Liebert, p. 145.
49 Seymour, p. 190.
The third zone is that of the histories depicting the prototypes of man in his direct relationship to the Divine and the history of God Himself. These zones are bound together by the continuous reflection of man. "Man in the lowest sphere reflects unconsciously the attitudes of the prophets and sybils which in turn are reflections of the Divine."50

The Pendentives

In the four pendentives are examples of the intervention of the Divine for the salvation of the Jews - "the salvation, that is of the Law and the House of David from which the Savior would eventually arise."51 The prophets and sybils have brought the word of the salvation to the Jews and Gentiles. The prophets and sybils are also characterized as witnesses to His promise that redemption can follow repentance. In the four pendentives of the ceiling are painted Judith with the head of Holofernes, David Slaying Goliath, The Elevation of the Brazen Serpent, and the Crucifixion of Haman. Through the tragedy and prophecy these Old Testament narratives "refer prophetically to Christ's mission of salvation and his sacrifice of Crucifixion."52

The Human Body

The body by Michelangelo "is beautiful not only because of its natural form but because of its spiritual and philosophical

50 Coughlan, p. 23.
51 Murray, p. 82.
52 Seymour, p. 190.
significance; the body is simply the manifestation of the soul or of a state of mind and character."53 The figures as both witnesses and participants to the great drama express appropriate emotions to the intended religious meanings of the scenes. Many of the expressive poses Michelangelo uses are similar to those in his earlier work, *Battle of the Centaurs*.

Because the cultural atmosphere of the Renaissance and Humanist beliefs placed man at the center of the universe, it is not strange that Michelangelo devotes a great interest and technique to the painting of the human body: "physical beauty becomes the reflection of innate harmony."54 Michelangelo reigns supreme in depicting the human body. His ceiling contains three hundred and forty-three figures; in the four years that Michelangelo painted the ceiling he averaged one figure every four days. Michelangelo did not take an interest in painting landscapes, "his world was the world of ideas, taking visible form, incarnating themselves in man"55 The language which most served Michelangelo was the language of form.

Because medieval painters and sculptors had believed that the soul was more important than the body, they tended to use their art to teach Christianity rather than stress the beauty of the human form. Like humanist scholars, Renaissance artists

53 Gardner, p. 576.


55 Symonds, p. 300.
turned to Greek models for their inspiration. They went to palaces of rich merchants like Lorenzo de Medici who had collected Greek and Roman statues. There they studied classical masterpieces in order to improve their own work. Like the Greeks, these artists took an interest in the human body - making detailed drawings of muscles and bones, experimented with light and shade in order to make the figures look round, instead of flat as in medieval painting. A Renaissance artist wanted to make his work of art resemble the real object as it appeared in nature.

Michelangelo did not simply copy the art of the Ancient World. The genius that he was breathed a depth of feeling and force of expression into the classical forms. This new conception of the human body as the greatest creation of God and proof of his perfection overturned the medieval concept that the body was a repository of evil and sin. Michelangelo's ceiling seems to make the statement that there is no greater beauty than the human form. In a sonnet to Vittoria Colonna, Michelangelo writes:

Nor hath God deigned to show Himself elsewhere,  
More clearly than in human forms sublime;  
Which, since they image Him, compel my love.56

Michelangelo's bold and precise drawing of the human body caused him great delight. He charged the figures of antiquity with style and potency. "The ceiling is the fullest expression of Michelangelo's genius in employing the human form and face in

56 Ibid., p. 299.
manifold attitudes and attributes as his supreme instruments."57 Michelangelo "seems to have intended to prove by them [the figures] that the human body has a language, inexhaustible in symbolism - every limb, every feature, and every attitude being a word full of significance to those who comprehend, just as music is a language where of each route and chord and phrase has a correspondence with the spiritual world."58

Michelangelo's desire to be sculpting, rather than painting, is evident in the rendering of his figures. For Michelangelo the modeling of these figures was paramount. The coloring and lighting heightened the effect of the modeling. The rosy brown of the flesh is harmonious with the greys and purples of the flesh. The draperies are painted with a bolder touch than the nudes. The painted shadows cast by the figures are also deep in tone. Using the lighting of the chapel, the horizontal lights and darks are strongly painted. The light source comes "from the direction of the altar, toward which, in the vast, celestial world of the ceiling, all forms and forces, symbols and events are directed."59

External Struggles and Internal Contradictions

Even while painting the ceiling Michelangelo continued to see himself as a sculptor. In a letter that Michelangelo writes

57 Alexander, p. 97.
58 Symonds, p. 299.
59 Hartt, Michelangelo, p. 72.
to his father Lodovico on January 27, 1509, he makes this clear: "it is now a year that I haven't had a grosso from his pope, and I don't ask anything because my work is not proceeding in such a way that it seem to me would merit it. And this is the difficulty of the work, and it is still not my profession. And this I waste my time without result. God help me."60

For four years Michelangelo diligently worked at a project he professed to dislike. Day after day, he worked flat on his back on a narrow scaffold built so that he was within reach of the high ceiling. He often worked under the most cramped conditions and frequently the unheated chapel was cold and damp. The strain on his eyes left his sight permanently impaired. Michelangelo wrote an impassioned poem on his devastating physical and mental afflictions for which the only recourse was to continue working.

On the Painting of the Sistine Chapel

to Giovanni da Pistoia

I've grown a goiter by dwelling in this den-
As cats from stagnant streams in Lombardy,
Or in what other land they hap to be-
Which drives the belly close beneath the chin:
My beard turns up to heaven; my nape falls in,
Fixed on my spine: my breast-bone visibly
Grows like a harp: a rich embroidery
Bedews my face from brush-drops thick and thin.
My loins into my paunch like levers grind:
My buttock like a crupper bears my weight;
My feet unguided wander to and fro;
In front my skin grows loose and long; behind,
By bending it becomes more taut and strait;
Crosswise I strain me like a Syrian bow:

Whence false and quaint, I know,
Must be the fruit of squinting brain and eye;
For ill can aim the gun that bends awry.
Come then, Giovanni, try
To succor my dead pictures and my fame,
Since foul I fare and painting is my shame.61

The need to see himself as a prisoner forced against his will and judgement to fulfill the desire of some more powerful male permeates both the poetry and correspondences of Michelangelo.

Throughout the years that Michelangelo worked on the ceiling his correspondences were also filled with financial complaints. Besides providing for his family, he was concerned with getting the funds needed to complete his project.

While Michelangelo worked on the ceiling the Pope was in the midst of a war against the French. In 1490 Italy was invaded by France only to be followed for over a period of thirty years by Spanish, Swiss, and German troops. The values of Humanism which professed courage and self reliance were sufficient earlier in the century, but were no longer enough to discourage foreign threat. The Italian reaction was to rid itself of the Medici regime and make a papacy monarchy. It was under Julius that Italy was to rid itself of the French in 1512.

It became hard for Julius to supply money for the ceiling commission because of his bitter campaign against the French at Ferrara and Mirandola. Julius was travelling between the battleground and Bologna. In September of 1510 Michelangelo stopped work and travelled to Bologna to get money from the pope. The

61 Ramsden, p. 62.
war was lost in May of 1511, but by February of 1511 money had been provided and Michelangelo was back at work. The later scenes of the ceiling are grander and larger. Michelangelo might have been inspired by the Pope's dedication in fighting for the new Italy.

Michelangelo also struggled with many personal contradictions while doing the commission for Pope Julius. These contradictions include "Christian piety versus attachment to pagan artistic ideals, Florentine patriotism versus the need to work for Popes who were anti-Florentine, and a passionate emotional nature versus profound intellectuality."62 Another contradiction returns to the days he spent studying and living with the Medici. The Dominicans distrusted the Medici who had corrupted the laity and the clergy. Michelangelo also disliked these tyrants, yet he owed his artistic advancement to Lorenzo and his family. He continued to accept commissions from the Medici Popes, yet he spoke out against their despotism. There has always been an inner conflict between the artist and patron which often included a median of allegiance between patriotism and self advancement. Still another discrepancy was that the reform attitudes of Savonarola were not conducive to an art which was based on the nude. Julius was also skeptical about the nude figures, but when questioned Michelangelo responded that he painted "simple persons who

wore no gold on their garments."63 Michelangelo was not painting the lovely objects of Leonardo or Titan, he was depicting the truth of human nature. All these outside influences obviously affected the attitude and work of Michelangelo. Without outside pressure, Michelangelo's first allegiance was to God, then to his own soul and his art and finally to his fellow man.

Conclusion

If Michelangelo had not gotten caught up in Julius II's ambitious schemes for rebuilding and embellishing the Vatican palace and Basilica some of the finest works of Italien art would not have been produced. When Michelangelo was assigned the redecoration of the Sistine Ceiling, his mind was still on the marble rock of Julius' tomb which was to be populated by forty nude figures. The nude was derived from the general admiration for antiquity which also was the admiration of the Good and the Beautiful. More than the influence of Humanism's emphasis on the beauty of the human body, Michelangelo experiences as a sculptor caused him to paint his figures in sculptural relief. For Michelangelo it was sculpture which gave life and movement to an architectural surface.

Because a single theological interpretation of the Sistine Ceiling cannot be made, the ceiling is a portrait of Renaissance concepts. Besides the personal struggles of the Pope and Michelangelo between 1508 and 1512, the ceiling is representative of

63 Seymour, p. 164.
the whole century before its creation. Michelangelo has mingled both civic and religious sentiments into the ceiling. Michelangelo has combined his experiences in the Medici circle with his personal beliefs. The ceiling with its most basic depiction of the fundamental concept of man's aspiration of redemption becomes almost a chaotic representation of the history of man, but which contrasts with the beauty and order that checks the agitation.

The Sistine Ceiling passionately asserts the unity of man's body, mind, and spirit. The beauty of the body is seen in the athletes of the pendentives. The mind is represented in the intellectual energy of the prophets and sybils. Finally the spirit is presented in the narrative of the Genesis scenes. The Sistine Ceiling presents an archetypal world distanced from the regular activities of humanity, yet it presents the major concern of the Renaissance man. Besides the redevelopment of two important ideas which had been lost to the world after the decline of Rome; the belief that man should be free to develop his abilities and interests and the belief that man should seek the fullest enjoyment of life, the Renaissance man was still deeply concerned with the human soul and its progression to an identification with the divine. The successive scenes of the Genesis series present this aspiration to the divine.

Michelangelo was also encompassed by these deep philosophical and religious thoughts, the ideas of death and judgement, and the struggles of the soul. For Michelangelo his religious ser-
vice was manifested in his art which reflected the light and shadow of an age.
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