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## INTRODUCTION

### HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION

The Sistine Chapel takes its name from its founder, Pope Sixtus IV, who demolished the medieval Great Chapel and replaced it, beginning in 1477 (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> In remarkably short time it was ready for decoration. In 1481 Sixtus brought to Rome the best painters from Tuscany and Umbria to fresco the walls with the lives of Moses and Christ and a series of portraits of popes, as well as to cover the ceiling with a blue sky studded with gold stars. The lowest zone of the walls was frescoed with fictive tapestries containing the arms of Pope Sixtus. The decoration was considered complete and would probably have remained untouched had an enormous crack not appeared in the vault in 1504, forcing the closing of the chapel for six months while necessary structural work could be done, which required the repainting of the ceiling.<sup>2</sup> Julius II, nephew of Sixtus, commissioned Michelangelo to fresco the new ceiling. The painter worked on the vault over a period of four years; it was unveiled at the end of October 1512.

Clement VII (de'Medici, 1523–34) conferred with Michelangelo in the fall of 1533 about commissioning him to paint the altar wall (Fig. 2). We do not know what motivated his decision. Vasari reported that Pope Julius had intended to have Michelangelo paint a *Last Judgment* over the altar and the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* on the entrance wall, but nothing had come of it.<sup>3</sup>

The artist had been residing in his native Florence since Pope Leo X (de'Medici, 1513–21) had dispatched him there to work on Medici



FIGURE 1. View of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican (Photo: Vatican Museums).

family commissions in 1516. Florence chafed under papal rule, so in 1527, when imperial troops sacked Rome and forced Pope Clement to take refuge in the fortified Castel Sant'Angelo and become a virtual prisoner there, Florence seized the opportunity to reestablish its



FIGURE 2. View of the *Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican (Photo: Vatican Museums).

republic. Michelangelo, an avid supporter of the Florentine Republic, abandoned the Medici Chapel in San Lorenzo and transferred his energies to designing fortifications for the city. When the ensuing war ended with the defeat of the fledgling Florentine Republic and the

reimposition of Medici rule in 1530, Michelangelo found himself in a difficult position, alienated from the papal patron he had deserted and residing in a city ruled by the young Duke Alessandro de' Medici whom he feared and hated. Furthermore, his obligation to finish the tomb for Pope Julius II, dead since 1513, weighed heavily on him, for he had signed contracts and received some payment for the project.

As had happened in the past, the ruling pope's demands interfered with the artist's attempt to complete the tomb for Pope Julius. Such was Clement's desire to have Michelangelo serve him that he pardoned him and directed him to continue work at San Lorenzo. In 1532 a compromise was reached and a new contract negotiated with the heirs of Julius II, reducing the scale of the tomb and dividing Michelangelo's time between Medici commissions in Florence and the Julius tomb in Rome. Hardly had this new agreement been settled, however, when Clement placed the commission for the *Last Judgment* before the artist. If Michelangelo was reluctant, as seems to have been the case, it must have been due to his unwillingness to take on another enormous task with both the tomb and the projects at San Lorenzo still unfinished.

Michelangelo transferred his residence to Rome in September 1534. When, only a few days later, Pope Clement died, Michelangelo thought that he would be relieved of the Sistine fresco and free at last to complete the Julius tomb. Such was not to be. Clement's successor, Pope Paul III (Farnese, 1534–49), already an old man, greeted Michelangelo's excuses with the following exclamation: "For thirty years I have had the wish that Michelangelo serve me. Now that I am Pope, can I not gratify it? Where is this contract? I want to tear it up" (according to Michelangelo's contemporary biographer, Condivi). Again the tomb was discussed and Michelangelo's obligation reduced still further.

The preparation of the wall in the Sistine Chapel was protracted over the period of a year, beginning in April 1535. Painter Sebastiano del Piombo, Michelangelo's friend, had the wall prepared for an oil mural, a technique that Sebastiano had developed and practiced with success. Michelangelo allowed the work to proceed for almost nine months, during part of which he worked on his cartoon for the *Judgment*, before declaring the surface unsuitable and requiring that it be remade (25 January 1536). No explanation for this curious behavior is offered by documents or contemporary sources; it may have been that he was stalling to gain precious time to complete statues for the

Julius tomb, for the contract he had signed in 1532 expired in 1535. His biographer Condivi tells of other ruses the artist devised to keep the pope at bay, and says that “he procrastinated and, while pretending to be at work, as he partly was, on the cartoon, he worked in secret on the statues that were to go on the tomb.” The wall was at last ready in April 1536, and Michelangelo set to work painting before 18 May, when the first of many payments for pigments was made.

The project necessitated bricking up the two clerestory windows and destroying the quattrocento decoration of the altar wall, Pietro Perugino’s frescoes of the *Finding of Moses* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* that had opened the cycles, and the portraits of the popes, all of which had encircled the chapel and continued across this wall. It was also eventually decided that Perugino’s altarpiece and its frame had to be removed and Michelangelo’s own *Ancestors of Christ* in the two lunettes destroyed, although the original plan had been to preserve both.

The painter’s final solution to utilize the entire wall, without even a frame, radically changed the appearance of the chapel, overriding the horizontal accent, which the continuous bands of windows and frescoes across the altar wall and circling the chapel gave it, and introducing a strong vertical element. With the *Last Judgment* in place the chapel now has a focus toward which the space seems to process, just as the papal entourage would process from the entrance opposite to the altar.

#### COMPARING THE DRAWINGS TO THE FRESCO<sup>4</sup>

The medieval composition of the *Last Judgment*, which can be represented by Giotto’s monumental fresco in the Arena Chapel (Fig. 3), was rigidly organized to convey God’s central place in the ordered cosmos and his control of man’s final destiny. The composition was divided into two tiers. In the celestial zone, Christ the Judge was flanked by the choirs of apostles, angels, saints, martyrs, and patriarchs. In the terrestrial zone below, corresponding to the Resurrection of the Dead on the left, were the Damned in Hell on the right. Each obedient population, assembled in its designated place, performed its roles with predictable emotion – the Elect joyful, the Damned in torment. The ranks were fixed and closed. The composition attained its order from the ordering of the static units.

Changes from the preparatory to the final design show that Michelangelo's conception evolved from the medieval view of the subject to one reflecting Renaissance ideas of human individuality and responsibility. He revised the traditional static composition to conform to sixteenth-century artistic taste for a dramatic presentation unfolding before the viewer. This comparison, which reflects Michelangelo's thinking over a period of nearly three years, can provide hints of his ultimate interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

When he set about designing the fresco, Michelangelo at first intended to preserve the existing altarpiece by Perugino and his own lunettes. This much can be deduced from his studies, particularly the sheet in the Casa Buonarroti, Florence (Fig. 4), where the top of that altarpiece has been drawn in and space left for it and the area of the lunettes is not included in the field. We can see that, from the start, he envisioned abandoning the tradition composition, breaking down the rigid compartmentalization and arrangement in tiers, such as we see in Giotto's *Last Judgment*. The Elect flanking Christ are already conceived more in terms of an animated chain of intertwining figures than as the conventional row of dignitaries seated on the clouds. In fact, in what is presumably an even earlier study (Bayonne, Musée Bonnat; Fig. 5), we already see a figure who turns to look down at those descending, an idea elaborated in the Casa Buonarroti drawing and used to great effect in the fresco. Between these two studies the figure of Christ has evolved away from the seated judge to a standing, even striding, figure whose arrival sets the whole event in motion. Even Michelangelo's seated Christ twists in a dynamic *contrapposto*, banishing the traditional static icon of the Judge in his mandorla.

The designing of the fresco appears to have taken place in two phases. We know that Michelangelo presented Pope Clement with a *modello*, that is, a large finished drawing of the composition, presumably in the summer of 1534. Although this *modello* is lost, two copies survive. One in the Metropolitan Museum in New York shows the upper portion only, but a second copy in the Courtauld Institute, London (Fig. 6), although reworked, shows the whole composition. An especially important change the copyist made was to the pose of Christ, whom he shows with arms outstretched. There is no evidence that the artist ever considered such a pose. The rectangle for Perugino's altarpiece is reserved at the bottom center. Saint Michael, who did not

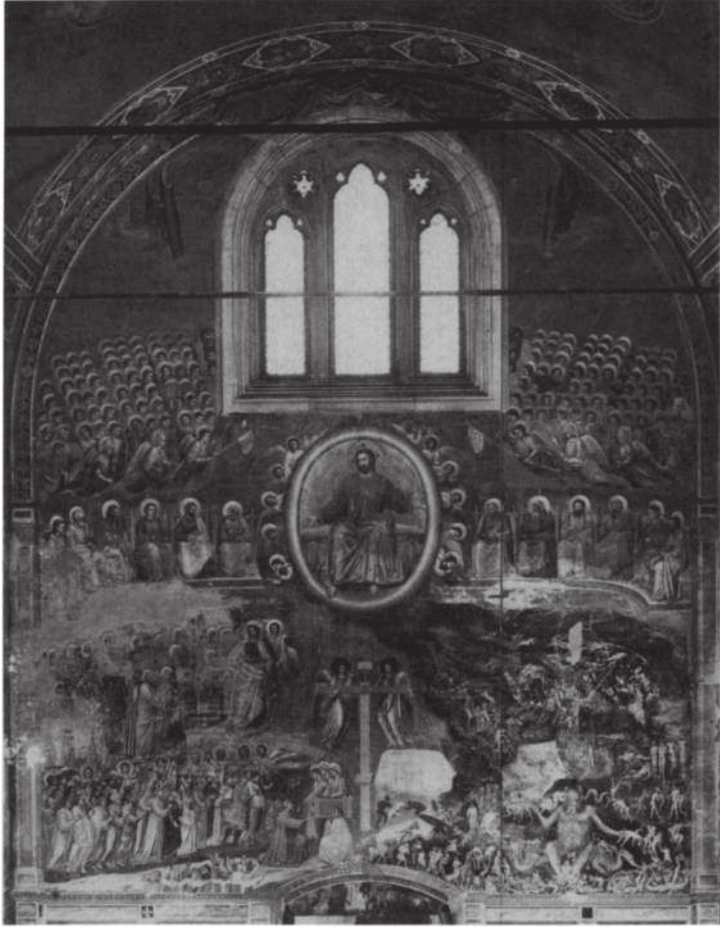


FIGURE 3. Giotto, *Last Judgment*, Arena Chapel, Padua (Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

ultimately appear in the fresco, stands on top of the frame, the symbol of judgment in medieval Last Judgments, where he usually holds his scale and weighs the souls to determine the balance of good and evil in each of them. Many of the figures of the fresco already appear, but their groupings would undergo significant development. They are sparsely spread about the sheet, not yet conceived in terms of the dense packing and overlapping that gives the final version the depth otherwise lacking because the painter has eschewed perspective renderings of choirs of similar figures.



FIGURE 4. Michelangelo, sketch for the *Last Judgment*, c. 1534, black chalk, retouched later in pen. Casa Buonarroti, Florence, inv. no. 65 F recto (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).





FIGURE 5. Michelangelo, sketch for Christ and saints, c. 1534, black chalk. Musée Bonnat, Bayonne inv. no. 1217 (Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource).

The drawings in Casa Buonarroti and Bayonne (Figs. 4, 5) must have been preparatory to the *modello*. The second stage of design would have occupied the artist as he prepared the actual cartoons during the prolonged preparation of the wall in the fall of 1535 and in early 1536. The large sheet now at Windsor of the Resurrection of the Dead shows many of the principal figures already invented, but their placement has not yet been determined. The sheet is a series of individual figure studies rather than a compositional sketch, but Michelangelo is also

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FIGURE 6. Copy after the lost design for the *Last Judgment*, sixteenth century, pen with traces of black chalk or lead pencil. Witt Library, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London (Photo: Courtauld Institute). Courtesy of Ultreya Archives, Milan.