Michelangelo’s frescoes of the Sistine Chapel

A DIFFERENT VIEW

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No.1 Introduction
Who does not know Michelangelo’s famous fresco The Creation of Adam, where two outstretched forefingers will seem to touch each other in the next moment? This simple picture symbolizes nothing less than the origin of humanity, inspiring a soul in the first human by God. It is a part of the ceiling and side painting in the Sistine chapel, where Michelangelo Buonarrotti found worldwide fame. While the visitors of the Vatican Museums in Rome can only admire these frescoes from a distance, this exhibition now offers visitors the opportunity to see these masterpieces as reproductions up-close. The exhibition allows a completely new perspective on the works of Michelangelo and presents itself as an independent artform. In 400 square yards, Michelangelo used all of his skills as a painter. In different paintings, he tells the stories from the Old and New Testament, from Genesis to the Last Judgement.

Michelangelo took on this task reluctantly. He recognized himself as a sculptor, rather than a painter, and went to Rome in 1505 to design a funerary monument for Pope Julius II. A year later, he was hired to paint the Sistine Chapel. Pope Julius II initially suggested the painting to be themed around the Twelve Apostles, but Michelangelo found this suggestion “poor” and instead created a complex painting of different scenes. The painting focuses on the Story of Creation, which was divided into nine areas. On November 1, 1512, after four and a half years of work, the ceiling frescoes were inaugurated. Michelangelo finished his commission largely without help and under very difficult conditions.

No.1 - No.8 The Ancestors of Christ
The groups of figures in the engraving caps between the depictions of the prophets and sibyls are designated by the name fields below as Jesse, Asa, Ezechias, Ozias, Zorobal, Josias, and Roboam. Nevertheless, researchers disagree in their attribution, since the individual names are assigned to groups rather than individuals. Most of the time these are simply referred to as the Ancestors of Christ. Michelangelo does not show an ancestral gallery but shows the ancestors as a small family. We mostly meet an older father, a younger mother and one or two small children.

No.1 Ezechias, Manasses, Amon
Ezekias, also called Hezekiah, was king of Judah, like Asa. He lived from 752 to 697 B.C. and thus during a time when the kingdom of Judah was particularly threatened by the Assyrians. Therefore, Ezekias often turned to the prophet Jasaja for advice and to seek divine assistance through him. But instead of fighting the impending armies, we see King Ezechias here as a toddler that nestles into his father with childlike trust. In the foreground, the mother looks worriedly at the small child.
No.2 Josias, Jeconias, Shealtiel
Josias – also called Joschija – lived from 640 to 609 B.C., in the kingdom of Judah. After the murder of his father Amon, he took the throne at the age of only eight. Josias died in battles with the threatening Egypt. A lament by Jerimias, whose portrait we also find in the ceiling frescoes, is dedicated to Josias.

No.3 Zorobal, Abiud, Eliachim
Zorobal
The name Zorobal, or Serubbabel, refers to its origin. It means “sprout babels”. He also came from the Royal House of David. After his grandfather King Jehoiakim was abducted to Babylonia, Zorobal belonged to the first generation of Jews who returned from exile. According to biblical tradition, it was Zorobal who started the construction of the new temple in Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed at the beginning of the 6th century B.C. by Babylonians.

No.4 Ozias, Loatham, Achaz
Ozias – also called Usija – was also a king of the house of David. His name means “God is my strength”. At the age of 16, he ascended to the throne and ruled for 52 years. His reign fell in the first half of the 8th century B.C. Also in this scene not only was Ozias, the ancestor of Jesus, shown, but a family as well.

No.5 Roboam, Abais
Roboam, also Rehaboam, was the son of the wise King Solomon and grandson of King David, the most important rulers of the Israelites. During his reign from 932 - 915 B.C., the empire was divided into the northern and southern tribes. Again, Michelangelo does not depict the ancestors of Christ as single portraits.

No.6 Jesse, David, Solomon
Jesse
Between the portraits of the sibyls and prophets are portraits of the ancestors of Christ. Researchers have been divided with their attribution and significance. This representation refers to Jesse, who is also called Isai. He was the father of David, who founded the kingdom of Judah. Jesse descends from Sem, the son of Noah. For Michelangelo, the central figure is not the male ancestor of Christ, but a female figure looking thoughtfully out of the picture.

No.7 Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joram
This representation from the ancestor cycle is related to Asa. He was the third king of Judah and ruled between 913 and 873 B.C. His grandfather was Roboam, who Michelangelo also included in the ancestor cycle. Here too, Michelangelo decided against an ancestral portrait. Instead, he shows a small family that probably tells of the king’s childhood.

No.8 Salomon, Boaz, Obeth
Boaz was a Jewish landowner from Bethlehem. In accordance with Old Testament Jewish family law, Boaz took the widow Ruth as his wife and was the great-grandfather of King David through Ruth. Salomon was David’s son. Obed was the son of Boaz and Ruth.
No.9 The Brazen Serpent
The Old Testament corner scene describes the rescue of the Israeli people from the greatest need. On the long migration from Egypt to the Promised Land, the people of Israel rebelled against God. He then sent venomous snakes. Michelangelo staged the fight with the snakes as a dramatic spectacle of writhing bodies. On the other hand, the believing Israelites are shown on the left, looking at the bronze picture of a snake and thus being saved from punishment.

No.10 The Prophet Jonah
The depiction of Jonah belongs to a group that shows a total of seven biblical prophets. These prophets had predicted the arrival of a Messiah. Their books form the fourth part of the Old Testament, which include their life stories, dreams and versions. Jonah had been swallowed by a whale and only escaped after three days and three nights, exactly as long as Jesus was dead after the crucifixion before rising on the third day.

No.11 The Punishment of Haman
Haman’s punishment links different sequences of the story about the civil servant, Haman. In the days of King Ahasverus, Haman planned out a personal revenge to have all Jews in the Persian Empire killed. It was only through the intervention of Queen Esther, who was herself a Jew, that his cruel plan could be prevented. The picture focuses on the execution of Haman.

No.12 David and Goliath
The struggle between the shepherd boy David and the giant warrior Goliath symbolizes the struggle of the just against the enemy who appears invincible. David faces the duel with Goliath, of the Philistine people, who threatened the Israelites. With courage, prudence and God’s assistance, David managed to defeat the enemy. The picture shows the moment of triumph.

No.13 The Prophet Zacharia
The portraits of the prophets are not arranged randomly. The position of the image of Zacharias directly above the entrance points to his prophecy. Zacharias had predicted that a Messiah would enter Jerusalem. Just as the Messiah was to move into the city, the faithful moved into the chapel. Zacharias lived in the 6th century B.C. in Jerusalem.

No.14 Judith and Holofernes
The story of the Jewess Judith and the Babylonian general Holofernes is in the book of Judith in the Old Testament. Around the year 600 B.C., the Lord of Holofernes besieged the city of Betulia. In order to protect the city from the impending conquest, the Israelite Judith went to the enemy camp, made Holofernes drunk and then beheaded him. The picture shows how Judith and her maid sneaked away.
The representation of the sibyls and prophets are inserted into the painted architecture. They are seated on marble thrones, but the portraits are not static. Michelangelo varied the attitudes and gave the seated figures additional dynamics. The sibyl from the Greek city of Delphi seems to have read the scroll and is now moved by the divine word. She predicts that the coming Savior would be taunted with a crown of thorns.

The prophet Isaiah had predicted the sacrifice of the coming Messiah. He lived in the 8th century B.C. in Judah, the kingdom around Jerusalem that was founded by the biblical King David. Isaiah put the fingers of his right hand between his pages as if he wanted to read on. But his attention is focused on the little figure standing behind him. These figures always appear in pairs in the depictions of the prophets and sibyls. They are understood as the mediators of the divine message.

This sibyl is said to have come from the coastal town of Erythrae, what is now Turkey. Her prophecy predicts many events from the life of Jesus. Because of the prophecy, Fathers of The Church, including Augustine of Hippo, refers to the Erythraean Sibyl in his book “The City of God” in 4th century A.D. Michelangelo finds his own motif for divine enlightenment - illumination - the light of the torch with which the small accompanying figure lights an oil lamp in the background.

The priest and prophet Ezekiel lived in the early 6th century B.C. Michelangelo shows him as an old man. Deep in his reading, he suddenly turned behind him. Ezekiel’s eyes are on the little companion’s hands, which are pointing towards Heaven behind him. They point to the origin of the divine message.

The Persian Sibyl shows Michelangelo immersed in reading. The sibyl has turned away from the viewer as if it had withdrawn from the real world into the spiritual. There was a long tradition of seers in the Persian Empire. The Persian sibyl was sometimes referred to as a Babylonian or Chaldean sibyl. For his attribution, Michelangelo referred to a script from the 1st century A.D., in which the Roman, Marcus Terenitus Varro, canonized ten Sibyls.

He is also called “Prophet of Misfortune”. The letters ALEF can be seen on the document to the left of his throne. The lament of Jeremiah in the Old Testament begins with these letters. This may explain a closed, resigned expression in the painting. Michelangelo shows him neither immersed in the written word nor startled by the divine message, but in a melancholy mood with his head supported. Even the accompanying figures in the background are evidence of his pain.
No.21 Cumaean Sibyl
Michelangelo gave each of the five representations of the sibyls an individual look. The female figures vary not only in their posture and expression, but also in different ages. The Cumaean Sibyl is depicted as an older woman with a furrowed face. The Roman poet Ovid had already reported that The Cumaean Sibyl was seven hundred years old. According to mythological tradition, she lived in Cumae, near Naples.

No.22 The Prophet Daniel
Michelangelo shows the prophets and sibyls reading. They are always equipped with scrolls or books, to symbolize their spiritual thinking. Michelangelo also portrayed the prophet Daniel writing as if he wanted to hold the divine message for posterity. Daniel probably lived around the year 600 B.C. Coming from the people of Israel, he worked for many years in Babylon as a scribe at the court of King Nebuchadnezzar II, where he was particularly valued for his ability to interpret dreams.

No.23 The Libyan Sibyl
The counterparts to the biblical prophets are the five sibyls. In ancient times, they were worshiped as seers. The Sibyls are named after their alleged place of origin, on which the name plates show at their feet. Here Michelangelo shows the Sibyl from Libya as a graceful young woman. The predictions of the sibyls were reinterpreted by the church and related to the arrival of the Savior.

No.24 The Prophet Joel
The prophet Joel is one of the oldest prophets in the Old Testament. Michelangelo shows him in full concentration. His attention is drawn to the written word of the parchment scroll in his hands. Joel announced a divine punishment that would come in the form of an army over the sinful Israelites. Michelangelo worked out the facial expression of the Prophet in great detail. The furrowed eyebrows and the wrinkled forehead can be related to Joel’s worrying prophecy.

NO.25 - NO.30 THE CEILING VAULT

No.25 The Separation of Light and Darkness
The separation of light and darkness is at the beginning of the story of creation. However, in the course of the paintings in the vaulted ceiling, this depiction represents the conclusion. God is shown from below. Michelangelo thus violated all previously known image conventions. In a theological interpretation, this first act of creation can be read as a reference to the Last Judgment. Here the separation of two principles is shown. The light corresponds to the elect, the darkness to the damned of divine judgment.

No.26 The Creation of the Sun, Moon and Vegetation
Michelangelo combines two scenes in the painting. The figure of God appears twice. The creation of the heavenly bodies is shown on the right. By pointing his hand, God creates the sun and the small moon. God is shown on the left again, but in a rear view. His hand points to some green plants in the foreground, painted with a light brush stroke.
The Separation of Land and Water
Before God created man on the sixth day, He devoted Himself to the creation of the world. Michelangelo freely interpreted the individual acts of creation from water, land, sky and light and linked them together.

The Creation of Adam
The creation of Adam is the most famous painting of the ceiling frescoes. Adam lies casually in the left half of the picture, while the dynamic figure of God approaches from the right. The figure of God, in front of the raised red robe, is surrounded by many small beings. But they are not the eye-catchers of this painting - it is only the hinted but not accomplished contact between God and his highest creation, Man.

The Creation of Eve
The creation of Eve forms the center of the vaulted ceiling. Adam has fallen asleep. Eve, on the other hand, stretches out towards her creator. Michelangelo introduces the figure of God, who appears as a friendly father figure. With his eyes, he animates Eve. Sin comes into the world with Eve. Because of her, Christ’s redemption from original sin is only necessary.

The Fall of Adam and Eve and the Expulsion from Paradise
The second group of paintings in the vaulted ceiling shows the story about the first humans, Adam and Eve. In this painting, Michelangelo combines two successive scenes. The fall of Man is shown in the left half of the picture. Eve takes the fruit of knowledge from the serpent and thus violates God’s will. But Adam also reaches for the fruits of the tree. On the right, Archangel Michael drives those who fell in sin out of paradise with his swords outstretched.

The Quattrocento in the Sistine Chapel
In the first series of paintings, the life of Moses is confronted with the life of Jesus, where the Old Testament is the time of law and the New Testament is a time of mercy. The scenes are combined both through their parallelism and their inscriptions on the frames, which wrap around the chapel. The stories from the life of Moses are located on the southern wall of the Sistine Chapel, while the stories from the life of Jesus can be found on the northern wall, opposite of Moses. The paintings not only contain Moses, Jesus and their contemporaries, but also contain numerous portraits of painters who lived during the time of Michelangelo. In the scenes of Moses, these Renaissance men appear in similar fashion as those in the Old Testament.

Quattrocento
Pietro Perugino

Moses Leaving to Egypt and the Circumcision of His Son
The Old Testament tells of God giving the order to Moses to lead the Israelites, enslaved by the Pharaoh, from Egypt to the Promised Land. The fresco is populated with numerous men, women, children and animals. Moses fled Egypt when condemned for manslaughter, and the different scenes depict his return later to the Land of the Nile.
**No.32 Quattrocento**  
*Sandro Botticelli*  
**Moses in Midian and the Exodus from Egypt**  
The right side of the painting depicts Moses killing an Egyptian and fleeing to Midian. In the middle, he protects the daughter and sheep of the priest, Reguel, from foreign shepherds. In response, Reguel rewards Moses by giving his daughter, Zippora, to Moses to be his wife. In the top border, God appears in a burning bush to Moses and gives the order to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Below this, Moses is seen leading his people out of Egypt.

**No.33 Quattrocento**  
*Biagio d’Antonio*  
**Crossing of the Red Sea**  
Biagio d’Antonio painted the passage in an extremely dramatic way. On the right side, the hunted Israelites arrive on the eastern shore by divine miracle, while the Egyptian cavalry drowns in the Red Sea.

**No.34 Quattrocento**  
*Cosimo Roselli*  
**Handing over of the Tablets of the Law and the Dance around the Golden Calf**  
When Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the Israelites pray unfaithfully to a golden calf, which was considered to be a relapse into paganism. They were punished severely.

**No.35 Quattrocento**  
*Sandro Botticelli*  
**The Punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram**  
Because the Israelites - Korah, Dathan and Abiram - rebelled against Moses during the pilgrimage through the desert into the Promised Land, God punished them with death.

The Bible describes the event like this: “The earth opened her throat and swallowed her and her house, with all people belonging to Korah, Dathan and Abiram and all of their possessions.”

**No.36 Quattrocento**  
*Lucas Signorelli & Bartolomeo della Gatta*  
**Incidents in the Life of Moses and his Death**  
The last days of Moses are illustrated in an abundance of different scenes. For forty years, God had Moses make a pilgrimage through the desert with the people of Israel. But when they finally got to the threshold of the canal, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land himself.
No.37  Quattrocento  
Pietro Perugino  
The Baptism of Christ  
The second series presents scenes from the New Testament. The contemporaries of Pope Situs IV, as well as the artist, appear as witnesses to each fresco. They are implemented within the paintings as a way to honor the men and modernize the scenes. These additions illustrate that God’s convent with humans extends to the present time and will have no end.

No.38  Quattrocento  
Sandro Botticelli  
The Temptation of Christ  
Christ, after fasting alone in the desert for forty days, is approached by the devil with three tempting offers, trying to dissuade Christ from his divine task.

No.39  Quattrocento  
Domenico Ghirlandaio  
The Calling of the First Apostle  
This picture illustrates a scene that the gospel described as follows: “When Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers – Simon (called Peter) and Andrew. They were throwing nets into the lake, for they were fishermen. Then Jesus said to them: ‘Come here, follow me. I will make you fishers of men.’ They immediately left their nets and followed Him.”

No.40  Quattrocento  
Cosimo Rosselli  
The Sermon on the Mount  
The Sermon on the Mount is a key event in the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew writes; “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven’.”

No.41  Quattrocento  
Pietro Perugino  
The Delivery of the Keys to St. Peter  
The Gospel of Matthew writes that Jesus wants to know from his disciples who they think he is. Simon answers “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” Jesus replies “You are blessed Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
No.42 Quattrocento  
Cosimo Rosselli  
The Last Supper  
As in all the New Testament scenes, the contemporaries of Pope Situs IV and the painter step into the pictures as witnesses to the event.

No.43 Quattrocento  
Matteo da Leccia  
Dispute over the Body of Moses  
What da Leccia illustrated is a scene described in the letter of Judas. In this letter it says: “But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”

No.44 Quattrocento  
Hendrick van den Broeck  
The Resurrection of Christ  
The resurrection of Christ belongs stylistically to the 16th century. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross, was buried, was in the realm of the dead, rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended to heaven until the Last Judgment to take the right hand of God the Almighty Father. Hendrick van den Broeck shows the drama of Jesus’ resurrection from his grave.

NO.45 - NO.48 THE CEILING VAULT

No.45 The Sacrifice of Noah  
Happy for the rescue from the deluge, Noah thanks his God. Around the sacrificial altar, Michelangelo paints a group of figures who are busy preparing the sacrificial animals or starting the fire.

No.46 The Great Flood  
The deluge is the great divine punishment for the sins of men. Genesis reports that God brought rain for 40 days to wipe out all life from the earth. Only Noah and his family were saved by God. He instructed Noah to build a boat - the ark. In the picture, the ark appears in the background. A white dove in a hatch of the ark is a sign of hope.

No.47 The Drunkenness of Noah  
This scene depicts the drunkenness of Noah. According to the biblical account, Noah, drunk on his own wine, slumped naked. His son Ham mocked his drunken and exposed father. This episode was interpreted in Christian theology as a prefiguration, that is, as a preview of the mockery of Jesus Christ.
No.48 The Last Judgement
According to the New Testament, the Last Judgment precedes the full establishment of the Kingdom of God. Christ will appear and judge the living and the dead. The chosen ones enter into the glory of God, while the unjust are condemned to the eternal torments of hell. The painting was created around 25 years after the ceiling frescoes were completed. Michelangelo, who was already sixty, created a grandiose composition that extends over the entire western wall behind the altar and comprises of 390 individual figures. Christ appears in the center. His mother, Mary, can be seen to the left of him. The multitudes of saints appear around the center as if in a whirlpool. Some can be identified by certain attributes. The apostle Peter can be seen with the key to heaven on the right. Like Mary, he is an advocate for people to be judged. Above, angels are shown with the tools of suffering from the crucifixion. Michelangelo shows the resurrection of the dead in the lower left. The chosen ones climb up into Heaven. The fate of the damned is depicted on the right. Driven by demons, they end in hell. Michelangelo’s contemporaries were offended by the physical sensuality of the many naked figures. Painting over individual parts of the body began in the 16th century.

A Different View
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