

## Michelangelo's Last Judgment as Public and Semi-Private Penitence Robert Baldwin (2009)

(This essay was written in 2009.)

### *Public Penitence, Fear, and Ecclesiastical Authority: Salvation Through the Church*

The Last Judgment emerged as an important theme in Western art in the Romanesque and Gothic periods (11-14<sup>th</sup> centuries) and continued through the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was particularly common in monumental church sculpture and painting in large cathedrals associated with bishops and popes. (Some cathedrals built by kings and emperors were also tied to secular authority allowing the Last Judgment to affirm secular rule as well. As such, the subject was even painted in some town halls.)

As an artistic subject, the Last Judgment responded to the growing contact between the austere values of medieval monasticism and the more worldly values of urban dwellers. This explains the appearance of the Last Judgment on the facades of Romanesque monastic churches which were also major pilgrimage centers such as Conques (1125) and Autun (1140). Here worldly pilgrims encountered harsh warnings about their possible fate as earthly sinners. The Last Judgment quickly spread to urban areas and began appearing on the facades of larger cathedrals in Bamberg (1111), Paris (1210), Amiens (1250-65), Reims (1260-90), Metz (late 13<sup>th</sup>), and Orvieto (1310-1330). It also appeared in large public murals in at least one town cemetery (Pisa, 1330s), on the ceiling mosaics of the Florentine Baptistery (1300) where it concluded a "world history" stretching from Genesis to Apocalypse, and in a giant fresco by Zuccari covering the interior dome of the Florentine Duomo (1580s).

The rise of the new urban-oriented preaching orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) in the early thirteenth century fueled a popular late medieval penitential piety taken up eagerly by all classes in the city, especially those at the top of the social ladder who had much to fear and to repent at the end of their lives. Although some Romanesque depictions already featured gruesome scenes of sinners tortured in Hell, the new late medieval naturalism pioneered by Giotto and seen in his *Last Judgment* (1305) allowed artists to develop much more elaborate and frightening scenes of Hellish torment. Some large murals such as *Last Judgment* in the town cemetery of Pisa even featured a separate fresco on the punishment of the damned (1330s). Heavenly delight was largely ignored as a subject, in part because it was less emotionally gripping as an image and because medieval monastic hostility to the body turned a blind eye to the many sensual delights of heaven.

With the rise of classicizing architecture in the early Italian Renaissance (1420-), large, complex sculptures no longer had a place on the geometrically simple facades of Italian Renaissance churches. While most large, late medieval depictions of the Last Judgment had appeared on church facades, most large Renaissance depictions appeared inside church buildings. Examples include Signorelli's frescoes in Orvieto, Michelangelo's fresco, and Zuccari's frescoes in the Florentine Duomo.

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Wherever they appeared as church art, all such depictions of the Last Judgment reminded worshippers that there was no salvation outside the church. The Last Judgment on the façade of Bamberg cathedral (1111 AD) made this explicit by flanking the portal with statues of Ecclesia and the blindfolded Synagoga. Found frequently in late medieval art, this anti-Semitic theme contrasted the true faith of the Church with the supposed blindness of Judaism. Frequently found in images of the Crucifixion, Synagoga was always placed on the bad, left side reserved for the damned in Last Judgments, as at Bamberg. In part, the Bamberg Synagoga reminded all viewers that no one outside the church would be saved. The inclusion of Jews and Muslims (even Mohammed himself) in late medieval scenes of Hell made this idea particularly clear. And at a time when words like “Jew” and Jewish” were commonly employed in Christian writing as metaphors for sinful Christians straying into any manner of false belief or ungodly behavior, the image of Synagoga alongside the damned in the Bamberg *Last Judgment* reminded all Christians of the fate that awaited any who succumbed to sinful, “Jewish” ways. In Christian art directly primarily or exclusively at Christians, the imagery of Synagoga was largely metaphorical. Salvation depended on submitting to the official channels and teachings of the church.

#### *The Persuasion of Torture and Fear*

The increasingly gruesome depiction of the torments of Hell in church art and in sermons offered a new appeal to human emotion, this in line with a wider affective spirituality of the late Middle Ages. In particular, the Last Judgment and accompanying scenes of Hell aroused the powerful feelings of fear, guilt, and remorse, all feeding into the Christian, institutional emotion of penitence. As we know since 9/11, fear is a powerful motivator. Indeed, fear is much more powerful than hope or love when disaster looms, as it did with the vivid, grisly spectacle of Hell displayed on the facades and interiors of the largest churches.

Church officials from the top down to the local preacher were happy to spread the spirituality of fear because it reinforced their authority and the power of the church as the sole intermediating institution between God and mankind and the sole channel and hope for salvation. Although Christ judged the sinners at the end of time, it was the church which played the chief role in this life as God’s terrestrial institution. Thus salvation depended on following church dogmas, church rituals and sacraments, church images and devotions, and church teaching broadly understood, a teaching and guidance which encompassed all areas of human life. Warnings on the facades of large churches were particularly effective because they allowed the worshipper to pass beyond these warnings into the more welcoming “sanctuary” of the interior where their journey toward heavenly bliss could continue safe in the arms of the Mother Church.

Although the Sistine Chapel was officially the pope’s private chapel, it was very large and lavishly decorated because it was the most public “private chapel” in the world, intended for lavish ceremonies, masses, orations, and the election of new popes. The decision to tear down the late fifteenth century frescoes above the altar wall and replace

them with a Last Judgment was in keeping with the whole tradition outlined above. Here, in a room already richly decorated with images of divine authority and the power of Old Testament patriarchs, a Last Judgment would be the ultimate conformation of papal authority.

### *Michelangelo's Last Judgment as Official Church Art*

As an image arousing all the fear, remorse, and hope of the Christian sinner, affirming the awesome institutional power of the Roman Catholic church, and conveying the miraculous and transcendent link between God and his earthly vicar, the pope, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* was in its day unsurpassed. It offers a terrifying image far more dramatic and fearful than anything seen on the Sistine Ceiling. As has often been remarked, the figures are now bunched into twisting, chaotic, densely interwoven groups suppressing individual autonomy, reason, and free will. The only powerful and controlling figure allowed to stand out as a single presence in the crowded scene is an angry, gesturing Christ. The chief intercessor, Mary, now huddles fearfully under his right arm while John the Baptist, usually shown symmetrically across from Mary as an important intercessor, is banished to the group on Christ's right. To either side, saints swarm with intense awe, astonishment, humility, and submission. Everywhere we see human weakness, helplessness, and fear in the face of God's wrath. And in the self-portrait on the flayed skin held by St. Bartholomew, we see not just the personal penitence of the artist. In the contrast between the heroic, classical body of Bartholomew and the striking ugliness of Michelangelo's distorted features, we see a new doubt about the whole classical beauty which still informs this fresco, however suppressed and transformed it is by Christian penitential values. Held up in the celestial sphere yet drooping down towards Hell, its insubstantial limbs and face hanging lifelessly with an ugly asymmetry at odds with the Vitruvian ideals seen in Leonardo's famous drawing or Michelangelo's Adam, Michelangelo's self-portrait repudiates any conceivable notion of human beauty or dignity. The body is revealed not as the glorious temple of the soul, not as a Platonic vision leading the viewer to a higher beauty and spiritual love, but as a repugnant, ghastly skin to be cut off and discarded. As scholars have already noted, this self-portrait on flayed skin evokes the Platonic-Christian idea of the soul liberated from the body, an idea already connected by earlier scholars to Apollo's flaying of Marsyas as understood allegorically in humanist philosophy and poetry. One should also note amidst the mask of ugliness a certain pathos in the disfigured face, a hallmark of the human sympathy and tragic quality seen in Michelangelo's mature works.

Below to Christ's right, huge, muscular nudes rise from the dead towards the heavens, their powerful bodies now powerless in the grip of superior forces as they float without will or self-control. A number of them display ecstatic expressions as they surrender to the transformation imposed on them. Below Christ's left, angels violently beat sinners down toward an eternity of torture while demons drag at them from below, some sinners gripped savagely by their genitals. At the lower right, a monstrous Charon clubs a panic-

stricken mass of sinners from his boat as they tumble headlong into the arms of waiting demons.

As with other traditional subjects, most notable the Pieta, David, and the Old Testament subjects on the Sistine ceiling, Michelangelo reinvented the Last Judgment, giving it a new level of terror and awe lacking in late fifteenth century examples such as Signorelli's Orvieto *Last Judgment*. Through this recasting, Michelangelo greatly magnified the gulf between wretched mankind and an all-powerful god. Surrounded by a solar glow, Michelangelo's Christ is often said to resemble Apollo, the god of poetry and music, healing, cosmic harmony, order, and celestial light. Michelangelo had already invoked the benevolent Apollo in the solar pavement in the Campidoglio made for the same papal patron (Paul III). But we should also remember that Apollo was an archer god known for his wrath and destruction whose arrows swiftly cut down all who offended him, most notably Niobe and her many children. Like Apollo, the twin god of healing and destruction, the apocalyptic Christ saves and destroys simultaneously, a dual quality captured by Michelangelo through the terrible beauty of his solar hero, at once Apollonian in his youthful beauty and Herculean in his heroic scale, anatomical power, and forceful stance. Far from the more slender, androgynous Apollo used as a model in his so-called "Dying Slave" (Louvre), Michelangelo's Christ displays an unprecedented *terribilità*. Appearing at the final moment of cosmic destruction, Christ's fiery wrath consumes worldly time and space in an apocalyptic holocaust. That such fire is echoed below visually by the flames of Hell only adds to the pervasive fearful symmetry.

#### *The Last Judgment as Private and Semi-Private Commission*

The Last Judgment also appeared in two rather different private formats, usually smaller in size. The first of these – the small-scale devotional image in a prayer book, small carving, or small painting for the home - does not seem relevant for Michelangelo's large fresco.

The second format is one I'd like to call "semi-private". These were images commissioned by individuals for a more private space than a large church or cathedral and which worked to display individual penitential piety in the lavish format of art works. Two early examples include the Last Judgment painted by Giotto around 1305 on the altar wall of the private chapel and tomb monument of the rich money-lender, Enrico Scrovegni. In the mid-fourteenth century, Giovanni da Modena painted a large Last Judgment in a private chapel found in the cathedral of in Bologna. As tomb monuments, both frescoes also imaged the patron's hopes for salvation at the final reckoning. Indeed. Giotto's patron appeared at the bottom of his Last Judgment on the saved side, flanked by monks and piously presenting a model of his chapel to the hands of the Virgin Mary. A third example is Rogier van der Weyden's *Last Judgment* altarpiece for Chancellor Rolin and his wife commissioned for the hospital at Beaune which they also funded. Like the hospital, the painted altarpiece decorated with sober portraits served to display the charity and penitential piety of these wealthy and powerful figures.

By calling such images “semi-private,” I mean to underscore the tension between penitential humility and self-denial and the equally pressing need to make a lavish display of one’s penitence for the watchful eyes of God and one’s fellow mankind. The richer the patron, the more lavish the display of penitential piety. The most troubled patrons had a second reason to spend lavishly to ease their consciences. Such was the case with Enrico Scrovegni, the tainted moneylender who built the largest private chapels ever constructed by a commoner at the end of his life and had Giotto decorate it lavishly with frescoes. By showing Scrovegni donating a model of his chapel to Mary at the bottom of the fresco, Giotto depicted Scrovegni “repenting” of his immoral wealth and dedicating himself to the glory of God. Here we see with particular clarity the tension between self-denial and self-aggrandizement in semi-private images of the Last Judgment.

### *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment as Semi-Private Image and the Politics of Papal Penitence*

Stationed outside Rome for months of no pay, some 34,000 German mercenaries in the army of the German emperor, Charles V descended on the city for a month-long orgy of killing, rape, robbery and ransoming. Most churches and monasteries were looted. A thousand citizens were killed. And the pope fled to the Castel St Angelo where he eventually paid a huge ransom to save his own life.

In the eyes of many, the Sack of Rome was divine punishment for a sinful, worldly papacy, a trend which had become acute in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and worsened since then. The spiritual aftermath of the Sack ushered in five decades of relative austerity and penitence in papal culture, especially in public arenas, and to a long-delayed internal reform culminating in the Council of Trent (c. 1545-65) and the Counter Reformation. As a penitential image in its subject and handling, Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* gave the papacy of Paul III just what it needed, a semi-public declaration of a new papal penitence, austerity, humility, and fear of God. That this declaration came in the pope’s private chapel made it all the more effective. Since the same pope commissioned erotic mythological paintings for his private quarters, selected the Rape of Ganymede to allegorize divine love on the reverse of his medallion portrait, was happy with the many nudes flaunted in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, and had that artist design a large town square using pagan themes to celebrate papal power over the world (Campidoglio), there is no reason to believe Paul III Farnese was a genuine penitent. Indeed, in his private life, he was no less worldly than most of his predecessors since the 1490s. On the other hand, he was also sensitive to the new penitential mood in the Roman church and chose the perfect subject for the altar wall of the pope’s private chapel.