

Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome, 1508-12 Robert Baldwin (1988)

(This essay was written in 1988 and revised periodically since then.)

In 1508, Michelangelo was called to Rome by Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the chapel used in electing new popes, the *Sistine Chapel*. The task took Michelangelo a mere four years to complete, a remarkably short time given the fact that he refused to work with assistants as was normal on all large projects.

The Sistine Chapel was built by Pope Sixtus IV in 1480. Its walls were decorated in 1481 by a team of painters including Perugino and Botticelli with fresco cycles on the Life of Moses and the Life of Peter. In this way, Pope Sixtus IV showed the Old Testament and the New Testament under the leadership of divinely-empowered leaders. Both Moses and Peter served as earlier expressions of a supreme papal authority conferred by God on a single man. The program included Rosselli's fresco of *Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* and its Petrine equivalent, Perugino's fresco, *Christ Giving the Keys to Peter* where the transfer of divine power was made explicit. Above these two fresco cycles, Pope Sixtus IV had a fresco cycle of all the great popes in history, thereby connecting the man seen as the first pope – Peter – with a papal history culminating in the patron.

Christian World History as Papal Triumph

The two popes who commissioned Michelangelo to fresco the ceiling and the altar wall respectively, Julius II and Paul III, continued the Christian world history begun by the Sixtus IV. Michelangelo painted the ancestors of Christ on the upper side walls, the Old Testament Prophets and pagan Sibyls along the borders of the ceiling, and nine scenes from the beginning of Biblical history down the center. In the four corners, he painted Old Testament heroes or leaders defeating enemies of the Faith: *David and Goliath*, *Judith and Holofernes*, *Moses Punishing the Worshippers of the Brazen Serpent*, and *The Punish of Haman by Crucifixion*. Under Paul III, Michelangelo returned in the 1530s and painted the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall. With the completion of this fresco, the pope's private chapel eventually boasted a complete world history starting with the beginning (God creating the universe, moving through the rest of the Old Testament (prophets, Moses cycle on the walls below) and the pagan world (sibyls) into the Life of Christ and Peter (below on the walls), through the history of the church (the portraits of the great popes on the walls), pausing to underscore the greatness of contemporary popes in the splendor of the chapel itself, and continuing to the end of time in the *Last Judgment*. The Old Testament and the pagan world both become precursor religions

Source URL: <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/essaysbyperiod.htm>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/arth206/>

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (<http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/>)
Used by permission.

Saylor.org
Page 1 of 18

foretelling a triumphant Christianity as the one universal religion triumphing over all time, fulfilling and vanquishing all earlier faiths.

The Old Testament appeared in Michelangelo's prophets, authors of Old Testament books made to predict the coming of Christ and in the four corner scenes of Old Testament rulers triumphing, Christ-like, over enemies and delivering their people. (One of these rulers, David, was Christ's ancestor, tying him even more closely to the Old Testament he fulfilled.) The use of Jewish authors to legitimize Christianity as a superior religion fulfilling its divine providence was fundamental to Christian writing since the New Testament which interwove numerous Old Testament texts and prophecies into the speeches and acts of Christ and more generally, into all New Testament writing. This manipulation of Hebrew texts was greatly extended by early Christian writers over the next five hundred years and by later medieval and Renaissance theologians. All this transformed Judaism into a precursor religion destined to surrender to a superior Christianity triumphantly fulfilling its prophecies. (The early Christian translation of the Old Testament into Latin made it even easier to assimilate to a single, unified, Christian world view.)

Implicit in this view of Judaism was a mainstream anti-Semitism which took on virulent expression after 1200 and continued through the Renaissance when Jews were expelled, ghettoized, and persecuted throughout Europe. While the treatment of Jews varied considerably between regions and historical moments, a moderate anti-Semitism was mainstream in Christian culture and institutionalized in basic Christian imagery, Scriptural interpretation, and notions of time.

Ironically, it coexisted with a new humanist scholarly interest in Jewish writings as an earlier source for the highest sacred wisdom. The result was a contradictory culture which extolled Jewish theologians and prophets one moment while broadly condemning Judaism in the next. When Michelangelo painted the Sistine Ceiling, the leading papal humanist was Giles of Viterbo. It was his papal world history, delivered in 1502 as an oration for Julius II to celebrate the Christian conquest of India, which probably dictated the basic layout of the ceiling's program. (No artist would have been entrusted with something that important.)

In his world history, Giles praised Old Testament prophets and pagan writers including the sibyls while subordinating both periods to a triumphant papal Christianity which reached its greatest worldly strength and empire under Julius II. Though Giles was one of the new humanists deeply immersed in the study of Hebrew wisdom, he did not hesitate to condemn Jews in his world history. Using a complex metaphor of metals and ages, Giles repudiated Judaism as a once precious, debased metal replaced by the true gold, and the Golden Age, of Roman Catholic Christianity.

How loathsome, then, was the faithlessness of the Jews who, although so closely bound to God, refused to grasp what peoples far removed from him made their own! How could they fail to understand that gold [i.e. sanctity] would be restored to humankind by none other than immortal God, when even their own books

were not silent? ... First he rebuked the Hebrew people for having despised in their worship and heedless rites, and profaned by their sins and irreverence, that appearance of gold which they had received from God centuries earlier. So Jeremiah lamented, How has your gold grown dim? (Lam 4:1). He meant that their religion had been despised and corrupted and their gold had deteriorated into base metal.¹

In a letter of 1504-8 addressed to the Roman people but written primarily for Julius II, Giles used the first pope, Peter, to condemn Jews as enemies of Christianity and to explain why God transferred his covenant from Judaism to Christianity, from Jerusalem to papal Rome.

But overflowing with the power of great faith, Peter seeks the people who seem able to be made a vessel worthy of receiving such a thing. He walks about, he preaches, he disputes, he exhorts, he relies on every resource, if somehow he might show that Jerusalem, the home of the old law, was constituted the seat of the new law; that just as the ancient vessel had received the incense of shadows, so might it now receive the poured out oil of his name, which is above every name, and of true light. But the Hebrew people, hard of heart (Exekiel 32.9), as Moses said, and stubborn in an amazing way not only do not receive Peter, nor the chosen fathers, but persecute him with cruel hatred, banish him from the Synagogue, order him to keep silent about Christ, and threaten him with punishments, prison and death if he should not keep silent.

...
Therefore let us move to this other place [Rome] as soon as possible. Let us leave behind these ominous regions [Jerusalem] and travel to better lands. Do we pour out pearls and blessed dishes into a pen of pigs? A sacrilege so immense or foul has now departed. Bring me a new vessel!

Who would put new wine in rotting skins? Precious liquid requires precious goblets and vessels. Find me new realms!

Behold the Spirit speaks: Christ is head of heaven, Rome head of the world; Rome is ruler, Christ is ruler. If this celestial bridegroom seeks a bride in the world, let ruler marry ruler, king marry queen, the emperor of heaven and earth marry the empress of the world.²

The longstanding Christian view of the Old Testament as an earlier law fulfilled in the New Testament is so basic to Christianity that we miss its anti-Semitic meaning and its foundational presence in the mainstream anti-Semitism of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance. To be sure, Michelangelo avoided demonizing his prophets with anti-Semitic caricatures or other overt imagery. Indeed, Michelangelo used everything at his disposal to magnify and dramatize the intellectual and spiritual power of the prophets (and sibyls), endowing them with the highest wisdom and dignity. Unfortunately, none of

Source URL: <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/essaysbyperiod.htm>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/arth206/>

this detracted from the anti-Semitism of the larger historical narrative in which these prophets were imbedded, a world history devaluing the Old Testament and allowing Judaism to be praised and condemned in the same breath.

The pagan world appeared in Michelangelo's sibyls who alternated with the prophets. This pairing of prophets and sibyls appeared in early Christian writing to show how all epochs and all humanity, Jewish and pagan, foretold and recognized a Christian epoch destined to triumph on the grand stage of world history. While the motif appeared occasionally in medieval art and in Northern renaissance art including the exterior of Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*, it became popular as an artistic subject only in Italy after 1450 in response to the new historical consciousness generated by humanism. Giles of Viterbo's world history offered a good example of just this kind of humanist Christian history, with prophets and sibyls playing a prominent role.

One sibyl stood out among all others, the Tiburtine sibyl. According to Christian legend, she showed the Roman emperor, Augustus, a vision of the virgin birth of Christ and the eventual rise of a Christian empire far greater than imperial Rome. This Christian legend depended on a self-serving interpretation of Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* where the sibyl speaks to Augustus of a new Golden Age ushered in with a virgin birth. In the Roman culture of Virgil's poem, written to celebrate the rise of Augustus and a new Golden Age of Roman peace and dominion, the virgin mother was the vestal virgin, Ilia, who gave birth to Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, after being raped by Mars. Ignoring Virgil's message, early Christian writers used the *Fourth Eclogue* and other writings attributed to the sibyls, to show how the pagan world also foretold Christ's birth and the rise of a triumphal, imperial Christianity. While Virgil and his contemporaries were oblivious to the birth of Christ, the rewriting of earlier texts and epochs to legitimize later cultures is a normal feature of every culture and nation, especially a new religion struggling to legitimize itself on the universal stage of world history.

The invocation of the sibyls also served Christian imperial ideology. This explains why the imagery of the sibyls took on special prominence at historical moments when Christian rulers faced political challenges and expressed new political ambitions. The late fifteenth and sixteenth century was just such a moment for Christian Europe which saw numerous images of the sibyls and the *Vision of Augustus* along with other Christian imperial subjects. The key event for all of this imagery was the fall of the Byzantine Christian empire in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks and the growing Turkish threat to Venetian territories in the Mediterranean and to Bohemian territories (i.e., modern Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia). Other events also contributed such as the discovery of the New World in 1492, the expansion of Portuguese, Spanish, and French colonial empires, and the crisis of the Reformation (1518-).

As a pagan imperial text easily assimilated to Christian empire, the story of Augustus, the Tiburtine Sibyl, and the virgin birth was widely appropriated by Renaissance humanists and artists to praise modern rulers as the Christian heirs to Augustus. In his Sassetti Chapel frescoes of the 1480s, Ghirlandaio had already painted four sibyls on the ceiling and the *Tiburtine Sibyl with Augustus* on the exterior of the entrance wall to

celebrate a Florentine Golden Age under Medicean rule. With his humanist training, Giles of Viterbo was quick to cite Virgil's text in his oration on the Christian Golden Age of Julius II. Virgil appeared in Giles' account of the divinely ordained transfer of power from pagan Rome (and Troy before that) to Christian papal Rome.

*... who brought Aeneas, the Etruscan who set out from Troy on a long course of travels, back to the Tiber to become founder of Alba and the Alban kings, from whom, after thirty yeas, the virgin Iliia bore the founders of Rome. And when they were to be thrown out to the crowd, although unjustly, he decreed that God, the son of a virgin and of God, should give a beginning to this city's kingdom that was about to perish. For it is know that later he truly consecrated God, born of God and virgin, by his blood unto an eternal empire. (For what Sibyll foretold about our God, Christ, posterity fastened upon the man, Romulus; and what was read about the mother of the Lord, that a virgin was going to conceive and give birth, they wrongly attributed to Iliia, the vestal virgin; and the things said about Christ's priesthood, which would exist at Rome forever, were interpreted of Romulus' kingdom, which was to fall after a few centuries. ... This city was later enlarged by seven kings, and it grew to such magnitude, now under consuls, now under Caesars, that as queen of almost the whole earth it at last received the king of all. It is this God who decreed that the empire of all should belong to this city alone ...*³

The oration finished by urging Julius to lead the Christian princes of Europe in a holy war against the Ottoman Turks, reconquering the Holy Lands lost to the Muslims in 1453, and restoring a universal Christian sanctity throughout the world.⁴

The main ceiling panels depict three sets of three stories from Genesis: the creation of the heavens and earth, the story of Adam and Eve, and the story of Noah (the flood, the sacrifice of thanksgiving afterwards, and Noah's later sinful drunkenness). Seen broadly, these nine panels depict the creation of the world, its eventual fall, God's plan to redeem the world through a terrible flood, and the continuation of sin after that flood. In this way, Old Testament history leads to a dead end, a world still enmeshed in sin despite God attempt in the Deluge to wash away corruption and begin anew. Seen within a Christian world history, the great theme of the Genesis cycle is the eventual coming of long promised age of Christian redemption which will solve the dilemma of sin left shamefully exposed in the naked body of a drunken Noah.

It should not surprise us to see a triumphalist world history spelled out on the ceiling of the pope's private chapel and where the election of all new popes made papal authority a major theme in the late fifteenth-century frescoes on the walls below. Since the pope presided over institutionalized Christianity as the head of the church, he ruled over the third great age in Christian world history. The triumphalist rise of Christianity, and eventually, of a Christian church ruled by a single pope, was further underscored by selecting scenes from Genesis which referred to Christ through traditional Christian

Source URL: <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/essaysbyperiod.htm>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/arth206/>

typological thinking. In this system of medieval theology which continues in modern Roman Catholicism, all Old Testament events were read as prefigurations of New Testament events and of later ecclesiastical ritual and values (that is, the third age of the Church).

For example, the flood of Noah prefigured the Passion when Christ's blood washed away the sins of the world. Noah's nakedness prefigured the stripping of Christ at his crucifixion while his eventual drunkenness suggested both the "bitter cup" of Christ's death described in the Bible and the later ecclesiastical sacrament of communion seen directly on the real altar below.

All such typological thinking worked to represent the later period of the Roman Church, as seen in Giles of Viterbo's frequent use of Old Testament heroes such as David, Moses, Noah, and Joshua to represent the modern papal authority of Julius II. Although Giles also used these figures to represent contemporary Christian kings, especially Manuel of Portugal and his conquest of India, all contemporary Christian victories over the "stubborn infidel" were credited to Pope Julius II whose election as pope restored a new Golden Age of near-universal Christian peace, harmony, and unity.

If world history generally created a series of heroic epochs ruled by divinely favored leaders culminating in the heroic present, we should see the power of Julius II in Michelangelo's frescoes, especially in the scenes of an all-powerful God creating the universe and Adam and Eve and in the heroic figures of the prophets and sibyls. Since the pope was divinely appointed by God as his terrestrial representative, one of Michelangelo's chief artistic tasks in the papal chapel was to magnify the power of God and that of other religious leaders and visionaries such as the prophets and sibyls. Even Noah, shown as a drunken sinner, retained the heroic body of a Roman river god in keeping with his lofty role as God's chosen leader and the father of all humanity.

Michelangelo, Creation of Adam, Sistine Chapel, 1511

God and his angelic consort hover symbolically in the air, moving toward the earthbound Adam, made from earthy dust and destined to return to dust. Despite this lowly origin, Adam is a creature made in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) as stated in Genesis. In the middle ages, mankind was generally said to resemble or "image" God only by possessing a divine soul. The material body, seen as sinful by most medieval theologians, was rarely said to image the Creator.⁵

It was fifteenth-century Italian humanism with its view of a divine beauty in nature and in the human body which allowed Michelangelo to envision Adam with a truly divine beauty. While humanist nudes had already begun to appear in Italian mythological art after 1470 (Pollaiuolo, Botticelli, Mantegna, Riccio, Bellini) and, more rarely in Christian art (e.g. Signorelli's frescoes in Orvieto, 1499-1503), Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling gave the beautiful body a new prominence. In a purely aesthetic sense, it was the principal subject of his frescoes. By doing this in a prominent arena at the highest levels

of church culture - the pope's private chapel in Rome - new humanist values took on a new status as official church culture with the highest papal blessing. Thanks to Michelangelo, what had been exceptional in the time of Donatello - a new heroic or sacred physical beauty - became the basis of a new sixteenth-century Italian aesthetic which would endure through the late nineteenth century. Parallels in church humanism are easy to find, most notably in a sermon of the papal humanist, Giles of Viterbo, delivered in 1525.

*In the beginning, when man was sent forth from the hand of God, the palm of God's hand was wide open and full of every good. For man was a most extraordinary creation, the summit and culmination, as it were, of all God's works. Such art and force and wisdom and enlightenment were manifest in man that he seemed to be a kind of miracle: the marvelous recipient of all the perfections scattered through creation.*⁶

Rather than creating Adam manually as a sculptor might shape clay with his hands, Michelangelo's God displayed a typically High Renaissance understanding of creation as a primarily intellectual act, with physical touch reduced to the most minimal contact of two fingers. Extending this idea of creation, Michelangelo depicted a fully conceived though not yet physically actualized Eve, nestled under God's left arm as if still buried in his consciousness. This novel interpretation of divine creation accords directly with new humanist ideas of the artist as a divine creator, working primarily from mind.

While sixteenth-century viewers surely marveled at the power of God's mind captured in Michelangelo's frescoes, they traveled to the Sistine Chapel from far and wide to see the power of Michelangelo's artistic mind. After all, it was Michelangelo who created this Adam, not God. The artist seems to announce his authorship of the Adam by making the wrist of an adjacent *ignudo* touch Adam from below. The effect is to transform Adam into another beautiful *ignudo* conjured up by Michelangelo, one of a hundred such figures on the ceiling. Michelangelo also underscored his own creative powers by surrounding the God in this fresco with five large male nudes, all products of the artist's mind.

In a fresco cycle focusing on God as an omnipotent creator, viewers were invited to marvel at Michelangelo's creative powers and to see the "divinity" of his artistic mind. If the "divine mind" of Michelangelo became a cliché in sixteenth-century writing on art, it was Michelangelo who first announced this idea in the Sistine Chapel ceiling as a whole.

While Renaissance art may have moved gradually away from medieval thinking with its greater dualism of body and soul, it did not seek some realm of pure body. Rather it replaced dualistic thinking with hierarchical values. As shown in all Renaissance cosmological diagrams like the one inside the cover of this handbook, Renaissance notions of nature and the body remained profoundly hierarchical, with mind crowning or

Source URL: <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/essaysbyperiod.htm>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/arth206/>

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (<http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/>)
Used by permission.

Saylor.org
Page 7 of 18

ruling body in accord with the larger rule of the natural cosmos by divine reason. Renaissance artists like Michelangelo went back to classical art with its plentiful nudes because classical art and culture already offered a profoundly hierarchical world where bodily and natural impulses were valued within higher orders grounded in religion, philosophy, social morality, and politics.

In redefining the body in new, more positive terms, Renaissance artists like Donatello, Botticelli, Signorelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo developed more classical models for a new Christian Renaissance culture of the body in which hierarchy and notions of higher rational order was very much present. Indeed, it was the explicit presence of higher orders and meaning within bodily experience, the attachment of body to a higher set of orderly principles and purposes, which made it possible for Renaissance artists and writers to justify a new culture of body and mind.

By showing the human body as heroic and perfectly proportioned and springing directly from the mind of God, Michelangelo's Adam made explicit a new bodily culture which was at least implicitly present in all his other nudes. Here, and in all of his art, body appeared as divinely beautiful, as something larger than life, as a heroic, even mythical realm, as an original, pure, perfect beauty long since marred by sin, as the exalted vocabulary for a new sixteenth-century art of religion, history, myth, and allegory which would rapidly spread into Northern Europe with the help of Dürer in Germany and the many Italian artists brought to work in France after 1510.

While the larger transformative impact of Michelangelo's aesthetic on sixteenth-century art surely conferred a new value on all human bodily experience within Renaissance Europe, one should also see within his heroic, godlike nudes a certain hierarchical distance from the mundane, vulgar, and often sordid world of everyday bodily experience. To see his nudes this way as the very embodiment of Renaissance hierarchies of mind over body, to see how his *Adam* could sanctify the human body while simultaneously celebrating a higher artistic creativity tied to mind and disdainful of all "low-class" menial craftsmanship, is to see the full complexity and ambiguity of Michelangelo's new bodies. They endowed human bodily experience with new value and dignity while loftily soaring beyond all imperfect, earthly bodies.

Gendering the Creation of Adam

It is no accident that God wears a long, flowing beard and displays a face of utmost concentration, his furrowed brow giving divine mind a powerful, dramatic expression. God is not smiling like a gentle, tender, loving woman painted by Leonardo; he wears the "masculine" scowl of serious intellect and dominating will (an expression also seen in Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* and many of his other masculine figures).

On the one hand, all pagan and Christian writers hailed mankind as God's noblest creation, uniquely blessed with a godlike reason. On the other hand, almost every pagan and Christian writer before 1600 noted that men were more perfect, more noble, because of their superior reason in contrast to woman's imperfect nature tied to a lower realm of emotional and bodily existence exemplified by "feminine" activities such as

cooking and feeding, lovemaking, child-bearing, child-raising, and nurturing. Michelangelo imaged Eve's essential "feminine" nature by arranging God's heavenly host of cherubs to circulate around the body of Eve as well, thereby doubling as images of her future children as the fertile "mother of all mankind" (to cite one of her common titles). Indeed, one of these infants is bathed in dramatic light and seems more human than angelic, gazing out with a haunted, prescient expression. His body echoes the position of Adam while he receives a similar gesture of a divine hand with pointing finger as if Adam and Eve's children are also present in the omniscient mind of God before Adam's creation is finalized. To underscore gender issues, God's greatest creation is Adam, the man. Eve's greatest creation as mother is Abel, another genitally specified male.

Developing the pagan and Jewish idea of man's perfection and woman's imperfection, medieval and Renaissance Christian writers explained God's decision to make Adam first by noting the primacy and superiority of men. As suggested in the Biblical narrative, Eve was usually described as an afterthought, a helpmate created to serve God's principal creation. Michelangelo referenced this longstanding tradition by contrasting the dramatically lit Adam, spread out in heroic glory on the picture plane, with the smaller Eve, only partially glimpsed as she cowers in the shadows under God's paternalistic arm. Her body never achieves the visual importance and dignity granted to Adam, even in the next fresco focusing on *her* creation.

In striking contrast to Adam, Eve's genitals remained hidden here and in the two adjoining scenes where Adam's penis is gloriously displayed. Here Michelangelo gave visual expression to a universal Western tradition (pagan, Jewish, and Christian) attributing an innate sense of shame and modesty to women in general. While this quiet sense of shame foreshadows one of the punishments imposed by God on Adam and Eve – as dramatized in Michelangelo's nearby fresco of the *Temptation and Expulsion* – the greater burden of shame falls on Eve in all three scenes. In part she was more shameful because she was almost always blamed for the Fall. But she was also ashamed as a woman, like all woman, and she expressed her great shame by covering her genitals in the *Expulsion* fresco. Michelangelo was not the first artist to allow Adam's penis to remain strikingly uncovered in depicting the couple's shameful expulsion from paradise. As early as 1426, Masaccio had done the same thing in his Brancacci Chapel frescoes.

Interestingly, Michelangelo's God creates Adam with his right hand while safeguarding Eve with his left arm, the side traditionally devalued in every culture including the Latin West as noted in the Latin word, "sinister". (The good right and bad left was particularly familiar in the Christian imagery of the *Last Judgment* which Michelangelo would later paint on the nearby altar wall.)

Unlike Adam who reaches out languidly to receive the blessings of his masculine creator, one male hand forming a near symmetry with another, Eve recoils from her

maker and looks on in dismay as if seeing in Adam her future guilt in the upcoming drama of the Temptation and Fall painted two bays away on the ceiling. Pushing away from God's body, she foreshadows her future alienation and physical expulsion as punishment for her disobedience. At the same time, Michelangelo shows her clinging to God's strong left arm, dependent as much on his will in her imminent creation as upon his future mercy as a redeemed sinner. (Adam and Eve both reappear in celestial glory in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*.)

By placing Eve under God's powerful arm, Michelangelo underscored traditional gender values in yet another way. Eve is the daughter of a decidedly paternal God the Father and she hides bashfully under his arm as she contemplates her future husband. Here we glimpse another future moment in Scripture where God introduces Eve to Adam, or rather, when the father gives away the bride, when woman passes from the control of one masculine authority to another. (This, of course, is the special punishment God later imposes on Eve to punish her for disobeying male authority; she and all women after her will submit to the authority of their husbands. See the discussion of the *Temptation and Expulsion*, below, for more on female obedience.)

Michelangelo, The Creation of Eve and the Temptation and Fall

As with Masaccio, Michelangelo's images of Adam and Eve are saturated with Renaissance patriarchy. The *Creation of Eve* is assigned to one of the smaller bays in accordance with the lesser status of women. And in striking contrast to the *Creation of Adam* where Adam and God appear symmetrically almost as equals, Eve is subordinated compositionally to the Creator. She emerges with a submissive, fearful, and supplicating posture and expression while God the Father looks down sternly, aware of her impending disobedience and reprimanding her for it.⁷ Adam's sleeping body twists away almost in repugnance from the emerging Eve as if instinctively disavowing any connection with her lesser nature and shunning the creature who will destroy his perfection, his immortality. (As is often noted, their bodies at the *Expulsion* are already withered in old age and imminent death.)

Patriarchal values continue in Michelangelo's *Temptation and Fall*. Though the artist blames Adam just as much as Eve by showing him reaching aggressively on his own for the forbidden fruit, the grand reaching of Adam's powerful body contrasts strikingly with the decorous, passive position of Eve, male and female natures defined in opposition to each other.

If Eve's seated, passive position offered another reference to God's special punishment for her - permanent subordination to the authority of Adam - Michelangelo elaborated this wifely subordination by placing Eve in a sexually charged position, as if interrupted in the act of performing oral sex. By disguising this sexual reference, Michelangelo made it into a crude joke for attentive male observers. And like most jokes, there was something serious at the core of this denigration. For it underscored Eve's fundamentally carnal, "feminine" nature which subverted the natural and divine order by overpowering the supremacy of Adam's god-like, "masculine" reason.

This was well established in Jewish commentary since the time of Philo who elaborately allegorized the creation of Eve from a sleeping Adam as the victory of carnal lusts over a sleeping reason.⁸ In Michelangelo's day, none other than the leading papal humanist, Giles of Viterbo, developed the same conventional idea in the same 1525 sermon quoted above, extolling Adam's perfection, given to Pope Clement VII in the Sistine Chapel. For Giles, Eve's carnal overpowering of Adam's mind is a compelling Christian example of a more universal principle of good government in every sphere.

..... The king issues decrees; the magistrates carry them out. And this is especially pertinent to the order of the well organized republic, because it is the function of the king to rule, of the people to obey, and of the magistrates to expedite.

The same is true of the republic of the mind. The king reigns in the castle; the people await his commands; and the magistrates carry them out. ...

Oh how fortunate man once was, inasmuch as sovereign reason was in command, since appetite obeyed its master, because magisterial force executed the royal mandates. Then man was living precisely as "man." For man consists of nothing other than reason and mind. But the order was immediately reversed. The king obeyed the people; and man was subject to woman; reasons followed feeling; mind responded to appetite, and spirit conformed to flesh. The republic, kingdom, and authority of the mind was perverted into tyranny. Man was then perceived as a beast or brute, rather than a man ...⁹

In the pope's private chapel, Giles' most important audience, of course, was the pope, whose masculine authority was dramatically upheld below, on the floor, by a rhetorical representation paralleling that of Michelangelo's dramatic frescoes above, which everyone could see during the sermon. One can imagine Giles lifting his eyes or gesturing upward when extolling Adam's original glory or the subversive impact of "feminine" carnality on all masculine governments.

By putting Eve "in her place" sexually, Michelangelo's *Temptation and Expulsion* did more than underscore the unruly, fleshy nature of all women. He also allowed male viewers to imagine their own sexual power over all wives and female helpmates and to offset the danger of female flesh by transforming the sexual sphere into an arena of male domination. Although Eve disobeyed God and destroyed Adam's original perfection, her sexual submission imaged her imminent punishment, and that of all women after her, to a lifetime of submission to husbandly (and fatherly) authority.

It is enough to cite conventional Christian theology and marriage doctrine to explain Michelangelo's sexual denigration of Eve. On the other hand, when located in the narrative of the *Temptation and Fall*, it is worthwhile exploring in Eve's positioning a possible literary reference to Lilith. Jewish commentary on Genesis explained the two, strikingly different accounts of God creating Eve by positing a first helpmate named

Lilith, who was deemed unsuitable for Adam when she refused to assume the inferior position in sexual intercourse. According to this interpretation, God expelled Lilith and created a second woman, Eve, whose initial disobedience led, eventually, to a state of permanent, female submission to Adam. As a highly educated poet living at a time when Christian humanists took a new interest in Jewish philosophy, theology and commentary, it is quite possible Michelangelo knew the allegorical story of Lilith. Even if he did not, he developed a composition which made female subordination clear visually in non-allegorical body language comprehensible to all viewers.

With these gender values in mind, it is interesting to note that Michelangelo placed the *Cumaean Sibyl* directly alongside the *Creation of Eve*. After refusing the sexual advances of Apollo, the Cumaean Sibyl was punished with eternal life but no eternal youth so that she withered away over the centuries and eventually disintegrated completely, leaving only a prophetic voice with no body.¹⁰ By placing her alongside the *Creation of Eve* near an *Expulsion* which featured aging, sinful bodies, Michelangelo developed another universalizing example of the story of female disobedience and affirmed the greatest punishment a humanist patriarchal culture could impose on women: a withering of physical beauty into old age and decrepitude remote from the youthful female beauty of the Delphic and Persian sibyls.

The Cumaean Sibyl as Feminist Counter-Example

One should also see conventional Renaissance patriarchy in Michelangelo's decision to represent the Cumaean Sibyl's formidable intellect by giving her a powerfully muscular, decidedly "masculine" body, in sharp contrast to the other, "feminine" sibyls. Indeed, her monumental body exceeds the muscular forcefulness of most of the prophets on the Sistine Ceiling, making her powerful intellect stand out with even greater force.

Medieval and Renaissance writers conventionally praised intelligent, educated women as "masculine" in their intellect. Michelangelo's well-known tribute to the poetess, Vittoria Colonna, is one of many examples. "*A man, a god rather, inside a woman*". (*Sonnet 233*)

On the other hand, Michelangelo transcended contemporary gender ideas to some extent by giving a heroic intellect to the only disobedient sibyl and by distinguishing, in this way, the nature of her disobedience. Eve supposedly seduced an intellectual Adam into a sinful world of "feminine" flesh. The Cumaean Sibyl successfully rebuffed a lascivious god and retained her powerful, autonomous intellect – her voice – even after her body had withered away. In her triumphant mind, strength, and virtue – qualities she shared with the chaste Judith shown nearby cutting off the head of the lustful, drunken Holofernes – the Cumaean Sibyl offered an unusual affirmation of female intellect within a larger imagery affirming the patriarchy of Roman, papal Catholicism. Even if her chastity was a throwback to more traditional "feminine" virtues, the Cumaean Sibyl took a grand and dignified space among the greatest masculine minds of the Old Testament, redeeming some of the flaws ascribed to her sister in disobedience, Eve.

The Sistine Ignudi and the Humanist Body

Perhaps the most strikingly new feature of the Sistine Ceiling was its countless variations on the dramatic nude, something most conspicuous in the so-called *ignudi* (male nudes) which hold decorative swags flanking the smaller central panels. Derived from the classical, decorative motif of naked, garland-bearing Amor or Cupid, a motif commonly revived in Early Renaissance Italian art, they have become so enlarged and so provocatively sensuous here and now stripped of their wings that their traditional origins have been obscured.¹¹ The many examples in fifteenth-century Italian art include the nude boys used as architectural ornament in Gozzoli's mid-fifteenth-century frescoes on the life of St. Augustine, the frieze of angel boys along the top of Donatello's *Passion Pulpits* in San Lorenzo, and the nude angels framing the Madonna in Zoppo's *Virgin and Child*. An interesting example contemporary with the Sistine Ceiling is the majolica plate with the coat of arms of Michelangelo's patron, Julius II where satyrs mingle with cupids turned Christian cherubs holding religious imagery.

Michelangelo's decision to expand greatly the scale and visual importance of the ornamental male nude emerged from his deep aesthetic absorption in the rhetorical, expressive nude. The larger importance of the *ignudi* is particularly striking in the three Noah scenes frescoed by Michelangelo. Here the ostensibly decorative *ignudi* dwarf the main figures in the religious scenes, especially the fresco of Noah's *Sacrifice*. Closing in on the smaller scenes from all sides, the framing nudes all but overwhelm the smaller narrative scenes. And in six of the nine scenes from Genesis (Adam and Eve and Noah), the carnal rhetoric of the *ignudi* dominates the main scenes, compelling the viewer to notice and admire the new classicizing bodily rhetoric which Michelangelo invented. While nudity was traditional for late medieval and Early Renaissance scenes of Adam and Eve, it was not found in scenes of the life of Noah except for the episode of the drunken patriarch.

By stripping most of the crowd of people in the Deluge, by adding a quartet of nude males in the *Sacrifice of Noah* and by stripping the sons of Noah in the *Drunkenness of Noah*, Michelangelo introduced a gratuitous nudity uncalled for in the narrative and absent from earlier representations. In rare moments, such as the Sistine *Drunkenness of Noah*, Michelangelo seemed to flaunt the nude more as aesthetic display than as coherent, expressive or narrative form. In this story, the drunken Noah accidentally exposed his genitals. One son mocked him while the other two, ashamed, covered him up. In Michelangelo's fresco however, everyone was nude, even the sons. Their visible genitalia eliminated the whole theme of shame and rendered the image all but unintelligible as a *Drunkenness of Noah*.¹²

Such an extreme example helps us see the whole of the Sistine Ceiling, with its astonishing, new focus on the dramatic nude, as a supreme boast of Michelangelo's

artistic intellect, a proclamation of the new, High Renaissance notion of the artist as a God-like creator, working from an infinitely fecund mind to spin out an inexhaustible series of bodily forms of an unprecedented variety, magnitude, and aesthetic power. In the Roman *Pieta*, the young artist's self-consciousness was displayed explicitly in the unusual, prominent signature. In the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo offered a far more extreme yet at the time, more subtle, unstated celebration of himself as a godlike creator.

In Michelangelo's hands, body became more than something carnal; it took on a new eloquence and complexity of expression while signaling the profoundly inventive thought of the artist. As an increasingly dense "text", Michelangelo's bodies were paradoxically, for all their radical carnality, expressions of higher mind. Beauty became as much intellectual as physical and as such ascended above mere sight.¹³ This elevation of body into noble idea, into complex philosophical figure of speech was perhaps Michelangelo's greatest contribution to Renaissance (and European) art. Of course, Michelangelo owed much to the Renaissance artists before him, notably early fifteenth-century Italian artists such as Masaccio and Donatello who began developing a rhetoric of the expressive, naked body, and especially later fifteenth-century artists such as Pollaiuolo, Botticelli, Leonardo, and, perhaps, Signorelli. Nonetheless, it was Michelangelo who achieved the most in this arena. In his hands, the potentially basest and most carnal of all bodies, the nude body, became the most exalted element in a new "High" Renaissance language of art. What had been associated in the earlier middle ages with the lowest, basest passions now became after 1512 the chief sign of the most lofty thoughts and spiritual values, the primary grammar of History Painting with its exemplary, "universal" narratives, and the chief arena of artistic invention and difficulty. From Michelangelo onward, the study of the nude, either in life drawing or drawings after antique sculpture, would become a fundamental aspect of the training of artists.

No doubt, this drastic reinterpretation of the body was easier with the male body in so far as masculinity was culturally defined as a more rational, less "carnal" gender. (Think of Masaccio's *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* where Eve bears the greater burden of carnal shame.) This may also explain why Michelangelo generally made his woman muscular, heroic, and "masculine". Here one thinks of the typically gendered, Renaissance rhetoric used by Michelangelo to praise powerful and educated women of his day such as his close friend, Vittoria Colonna, "*A man, a god rather, inside a woman*".¹⁴

By masculinizing and heroicizing the female body, Michelangelo also managed to transform the supposedly "less rational" gender and its "more carnal" body into a worthy sign for the highest thoughts. The same poem to Vittoria continued, "*Her beautiful features summon upward from false desire...*".¹⁵ In this way, Michelangelo's new language of the body was inflected with contemporary patriarchal gender values and hierarchies. For some artists, the reinterpretation of the body required rescuing it, to some extent, from "feminine" sensuality and weakness.

Though Michelangelo's reinterpretation of the body betrays both the gendered prejudices shared by his larger cultural world and his own homoerotic response to physical beauty, his larger artistic achievement was to resurrect the body in general and endow it with a sacred dignity central to Renaissance humanism. While humanists and humanistic artists like Michelangelo retained traditional body-mind hierarchies - in some ways they were more important than ever to legitimizing the new carnal body - Michelangelo's new aesthetic also valued the erotic body and the world of human sexuality. For all its culturally inscribed preference for the heroic male body with its ties to humanist public accomplishment, exemplary feats, and powerful authority (vs. the female body with its ties to private sensuality and potential dissipation), Michelangelo's art went well beyond the experiments of Donatello and Masaccio in the early fifteenth-century or the later, more consistent efforts of a Botticelli or Pollaiuolo to endow even the sexual body with new value.

By showing God as the creator of beautiful, desirable human bodies (*Creation of Adam*; *Creation of Eve*), Michelangelo legitimized the new aesthetic of heroic nudes which the Sistine Ceiling as a whole inaugurated and which found its most vivid display in the profusion of the ornamental male nudes framing the smaller Genesis panels. That this new aesthetic was installed in one of the most powerful, sacred spaces in Christian Europe - the pope's private chapel - only gave it additional authority and influence. Thanks in large part to this reinterpretation of the human body, much of the most ambitious and serious painting in Western art until the early twentieth century focused on the heroic nude.

Michelangelo's Bodies: Artistic Originality and its Limits

We project modern notions of genius and originality onto Michelangelo if we see him as someone who single-handedly legitimized the naked body in Western culture. The realities of Renaissance art were more complicated. From the start, Michelangelo's bodies must have been offensive to some people. With the arrival of a more penitential Christian mood after the Sack of Rome (1526) and the election of the austere, reform-minded pope Paul III (1534-49), the cultural climate gradually shifted away from allowing nudity in European Catholic art. By 1545 (and probably since the early 1530s), the Medici had covered the genitals of Michelangelo's *David* with gilded leaves. (It was still on display outside what was once the town hall, now the Medici palace.)¹⁶ In the 1540s, the nudes of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1535-6) were even widely denounced, especially by monastic writers and a few opportunistic men of letters like Aretino.¹⁷ After a heated discussion of whether to tear down the entire fresco or paint draperies over the many exposed genitals, the pope decided on the latter. Even in the mid-1990s, Pope John Paul insisted that the restoration of the *Last Judgment* leave those later draperies intact. In short, no cultural shifts or innovations should ever be taken as permanent. History is not an unbroken, linear movement in a certain direction. At best, it zig zags unpredictably, changing and reinterpreting what came before.

Source URL: <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/essaysbyperiod.htm>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/arth206/>

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (<http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/>)
Used by permission.

Saylor.org
Page 15 of 18

On the other hand, Michelangelo's art did, at least in retrospect, have a certain enduring effect on Western conventions for representing the body. Complete nudity remained common in secular as opposed to church art and an overall nudity (except for the genitals) remained acceptable in religious painting until the nineteenth century. The official campaign against nudity in Catholic art across Europe unleashed by the Counter Reformation after 1566 was at best partial and confined primarily to gratuitous nudity and to the genitals.

As with all important individual aesthetic accomplishments, an understanding of Michelangelo's innovations and larger impact should not obscure the fact that his refiguring of the body could never have occurred at an earlier historical-cultural moment. It had deep roots in late fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance culture and in a local artistic tradition stretching back to Masaccio and Donatello. So too, its larger impact on early sixteenth-century European art suggests not just its aesthetic power but also the receptive nature of European culture to the expression of new ideas which had already been gathering cultural momentum for some time. Four years before Michelangelo began work on the Sistine Ceiling, Signorelli completed a massive, five-year fresco cycle in Orvieto with a *Last Judgment* featuring a tangle of muscular, twisting nudes.

¹ Francis Martin, Friar, Reformer and Renaissance Scholar: Life and Work of Giles of Viterbo, Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1992, pp. 240-241

² Francis Martin, Friar, Reformer and Renaissance Scholar, op. cit., pp.215-216.

³ Francis Martin, Friar, Reformer and Renaissance Scholar, op. cit., p.275.

⁴ In his *Oration on the Golden Age*, Giles distinguished between three subject peoples and three kinds of papal authority.

... there are three categories of people to be governed—for some always obey their rulers, some seek mercy because they do not always obey, and some do not obey nor ever seek mercy—the best rulers surely give peace to the first category, mercy to the second, and subdue the rest with warlike necessity. (Martin, op. cit., p. 280)

⁵

⁶ Francis Martin, Friar, Reformer and Renaissance Scholar, op. cit., p. 320

⁷

⁸ Philo of Alexandria, *Allegorical Interpretation*, II. 8-20, pp. 245, 249, 255, 453

[245] ...Whenever the mind forgets itself amid the luxuries of a festive gathering and is mastered by all that conduces to pleasure, we are in bondage and we leave our "unseemliness" uncovered. But if the reason prove strong enough to purge the passion, we neither go on drinking till we are drunk, nor eat so greedily as to wax wanton, but we banish folly and take our food

soberly. Thus the wakefulness of the senses means sleep for the mind, and the wakefulness of the mind at time of leisure for the senses; just as, when the sun has risen, the lights of the other heavenly bodies are invisible; when it has set, they show themselves. The mind like the sun, when awake, throws the senses into the shade, but if it goes to sleep, it causes them to shine out.

. . . [249] And so he adds the words, "He built it to be a woman" (Gen.ii.22), proving by this that the most proper and exact name for sense-perception is "woman." For just as the man shows himself in activity and the woman in passivity, so the province of the mind is activity, and that of the perceptive sense passivity, as in woman. . . .

[255] XIV. "For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and the twain shall be one flesh" (Gen.ii.24). . . . Observe that it is not the woman that cleaves to the man, [257] but conversely the man to the woman, Mind to Sense-perception. For when that which is superior, namely Mind, becomes one with that which is inferior, namely Sense-perception, it resolves itself into the order of flesh which is inferior, into sense-perception, the moving cause of the passions. . . . Exceeding well did God the Framer of living beings contrive the order in which they were created. First He made mind, the man, for mind is most venerable in a human being, then bodily sense, the woman, then after them in the third place pleasure....

. . . .
 [453] LXXIX . . . Most profitless is it that Mind should listen to Sense-perception, and not Sense-perception to Mind: for it is always right that the superior should rule and the inferior be ruled; and Mind is superior to Sense-perception. When the charioteer is in command and guides the horses with the reins, the chariot goes the way he wishes, but if the horses have become unruly and got the upper hand, it has often happened that the charioteer has been dragged down and that the horses have been precipitated into a ditch by the violence of their motion, and that there is a general disaster. . . . Just so, when Mind, the charioteer or helmsman of the soul, rules the whole living being as a governor does a city, the life holds a straight course, but when irrational sense gains the chief place, a terrible confusion overtakes it, just as when slaves have risen against masters: for then, in very deed, the mind is set on fire and is all ablaze, and that fire is kindled by the objects of sense which Sense-perception supplies. . . .
 .[459] the women, the senses, that is, lit a fire, a huge conflagration, to add to its [the mind's] disasters.

⁹ Francis Martin, Friar, Reformer and Renaissance Scholar, op. cit., pp.322-323.

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIV.130-153.

*He [Apollo] promised me the years - and if I'd sleep
 with him, I'd be forever then as now,
 A girlish goddess resting in his arms.
 But I said no, and took the years unmarried;
 Summer is gone, and trembling old age follows,
 And years to follow these, and more, and more,
 Seven centuries gone by, nor sands nor dust*

*Is counted end of years; yet I must see
 Three hundred seasons of the harvest moon,
 Three hundred autumns of the purple vine.
 So as my years increase, I shall grow less,
 Withering beyond old age to small, then smaller,
 Limbs, branches in the wind, then twigs, then feathers,
 So dry, so small, so next to nothingness
 It shall seem strange that I was someone loved,
 Loved at first sight and cherished by a god.
 Even Phoebus shall glance past me, seeing nothing.
 And then say that he never looked at me.
 Myself, almost invisible or vanished,
 Shall be a voice, the last poor gift of fate.*

¹¹ The best discussion of the ignudi is one of the shortest, in a book review by John Pope Hennessey published in the 1980s in the New York Review of Books.

¹² See the discussion in Tom Martone, *Art Bulletin*, 1980s. The nudity of the sons may have some theological coherence as an image of the bodily sin which continues after Noah, pointing the way for Christ's incarnation.

¹³ In one madrigal (Gilbert, no. 162), Michelangelo located beauty above the realm of mere sight.

As a trustworthy guide in my vocation,
 When I was born I had a gift for beauty,
 In both the arts my lantern and my mirror,
 Who otherwise believes has a false notion;
 Only this to the heights the eye will carry
 Where I prepare to be painter and sculptor

And even if Judgments that are rash and futile
 Tie sense to beauty, which will only bear
 To Heaven the most wise intelligence,
 No eye can reach the holy from the mortal,
 Infirm and always firmly set just where
 It's vain to think of mounting without grace