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The Line of Fate in Michelangelo's Painting

Leo Steinberg

There are several reasons why an art historian of fastidious taste might want to look at bad art—at poor early copies, for instance, of a great painting, even when the latter survives in near perfect condition. I will need the reader's goodwill on this point since the present essay continually pairs copies of little intrinsic merit with their awesome originals.

That early copies may furnish evidence of damage accrued to the original, and of subsequent overpainting, is obvious and requires no argument. But copies have subtler uses. Where they depart from their models—provided these departures are patently willful and not due to incompetence—they constitute a body of criticism more telling than anything dreamt of in contemporaneous writing. The man who copies a painting looks harder, observes by the inch, and where he refuses to follow his model, follows an alternative, usually critical impulse. Few writers on art have the patience or the vocabulary to match the involvement of a recalcitrant copyist. His alterations reveal how a closely engaged contemporary regarded his model, what he admired or censured, or chose to omit. But while we welcome contemporary comments recorded in writing as evidence of critical attitudes, the more pointed critiques embodied in the copyists' alterations are commonly brushed aside as inaccuracies without positive content.¹

One more consideration: in a strong design the detail is so integrated that it is hard to unthink. But a deviant rendering in the copy restores to the corresponding feature of the original the character of a decision. One comes to see it as a thing done—and if done, presumably for a reason. Where a copy is manifestly at odds with its model, it not



FIG. 1.—Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, fresco. Vatican, Cappella Paolina.

only leads me to see what the copyist missed but what I too hadn't noticed. Ours is by nature a pejorative eye, better adapted to registering a mismatch than agreement. The discrepancies that leap to the eye in comparing replicas with their ostensible models are jolts to one's visual sloth.

Of Michelangelo's last painting—the *Crucifixion of Peter*, completed in 1549 at age seventy-four—three sixteenth-century copies are known: an engraving by Giovanni Battista de Cavalieri, an etching by Michele Lucchese, and an unattributed panel painting (figs. 1-4). The engraving reverses the composition and cuts off the sky; the etching converts the

Nevertheless, numerous adjustments and alterations were made—but these, on the face of it, are so inconsequential that the very recital of them suggests a pedantic insensitivity to large issues.

Larger the issues could hardly be. Michelangelo's wall-size fresco was created for the Cappella Paolina, newly built to adjoin the Vatican's stateroom—a chapel designed for the staging of future papal elections. Its decoration had to address the effective meaning of the proceedings, Christ's grant of authority to the Church. But instead of representing Saint Peter in the act of receiving the keys, the fresco, contrary to expectation, depicted a martyrdom: the Prince of Apostles, impaled for his upside-down crucifixion, wrenches his body around and inflicts an all-seeing glance on the voters, of whom one will be summoned to follow him in the Apostolic Succession. A forbidding work, overwhelming in scale, chilling in color, oppressive in its troubled calm and inhibited motion. Whoever has seen it *in situ* without a shudder has not seen well. But my present purpose is not so much to praise the original as to focus on certain minutiae in the copies.

1. Concerning the Ancient in the Phrygian cap, descending at lower right: in the fresco, he strides down almost to very bottom; not a hand's breadth separates his forward foot from the margin, leaving no slack in which to consummate the next step. The copies elevate his position and provide space underfoot to give him somewhere to go. This accommodation must have struck the copyists as a gain. The loss, if there is one, appears only in the context of that thoroughgoing diagonal which dips from the upper left of the fresco toward the lower right corner. By elevating the Ancient's figure, the weight of the downtrend is eased and dispersed.

2. All three copies curtail the transverse beam of the cross. In the fresco (fig. 5), its bright upper end projects past the haunch of the young executioner (three-quarter back view, *regardant*). In the replicas, the raised end of the crossbeam is both dimmed and cut back. The copyists evidently thought it a pity to see the sweep of the young henchman's hip interrupted by an overrun of mere timber. The fact that this "interruption" helped to promote the continuity of the aforementioned diagonal was no deterrent.

3. In the fresco, the bare-shouldered soldier with pointing index (right of center behind the stem of the cross, wearing a yellow-green leather casque) has no body. Hardly more than a head, arm, and right side of bust constitute his physique; the rest never materialized, though the space to receive it is vacant. Now the artist may have been simply negligent, in which case Michelangelo's commentators, disregarding the lapse, will have matched the original oversight with complementary inattention. Only the copyists saw what had happened and balked, and supplied the deficiency by means of a fluted skirt touching down beneath Peter's arm. But what could have caused Michelangelo to deny this bare moiety of a man his full allotment of body? It takes more than negligence

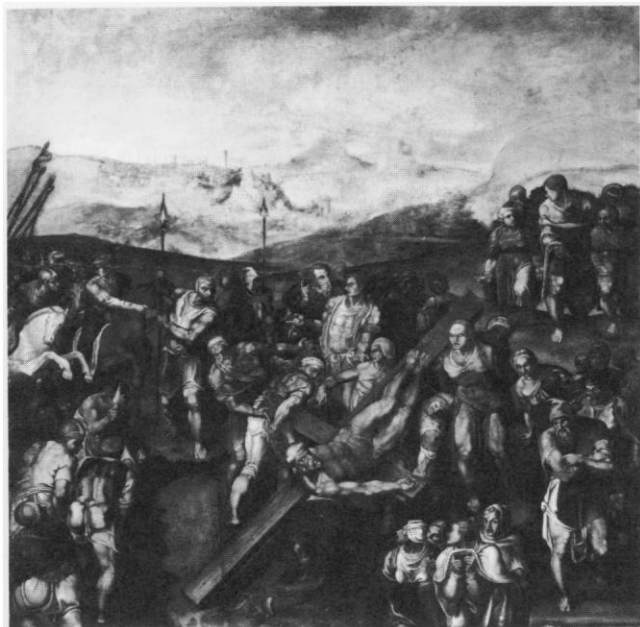


FIG. 3.—Anonymous sixteenth-century painter after Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, panel. Private collection.

FIG. 4.—Giovanni Battista de Cavalieri after Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, engraving (reversed).



to forget that a soldier has legs; and more than indifference to leave such radical deprivation unremedied through three years of labor. We discover a likely motive when we observe how the omission works and how its work is undone in the copies. For the effect of the unfilled void at the crux is once more to keep that insistent diagonal uninterrupted, gliding over a blank; whereas the columnar extension of Michelangelo's fragment figure stabilizes the center and hampers the downward flow.

One last detail. At upper left, between the profile of the mounted captain and the turbaned head of the rider behind, Michelangelo inserts

FIG. 5.—Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, detail.





FIG. 6.—Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, detail.

the flat palm of the third in the cavalcade—thumbs up, fingers unfurled (fig. 6). Since this left hand performs no telling gesture, the copies either divert or delete it. The hand's role as hyphen between the captain and his first follower is ignored.

Now the reader may feel that none of the changes described is *significant*, that Michelangelo's narrative content has not been disturbed. If so, he sides with the copyists who must also have felt that their venial trespasses were too slight to affect the work's meaning. I believe they were wrong.

Some years ago I concluded a monograph on the two Cappella Paolina frescoes by hypothesizing a latent, confessional content in the scene of the *Crucifixion*.³ My interpretation enlisted the very features spurned by the copyists; which explains why that diagonal has been so much on my mind. Following is what I wrote, more or less.

The *Crucifixion* fresco contains no certain self-portraits. Yet two among the fifty-odd faces depicted have been claimed as likenesses of Michelangelo; not perfect resemblances, but facial types into which a self-conscious artist would inevitably project a symbolic self-image. One of these is the ancient solitary at lower right, approaching his exit. He recalls the doleful self-portrait Michelangelo carved upon the face of the mourner in the Florence Duomo *Pietà*. Since this is the work that occupied Michelangelo's nights at home while he was painting the Vatican



FIG. 7.—Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, detail.

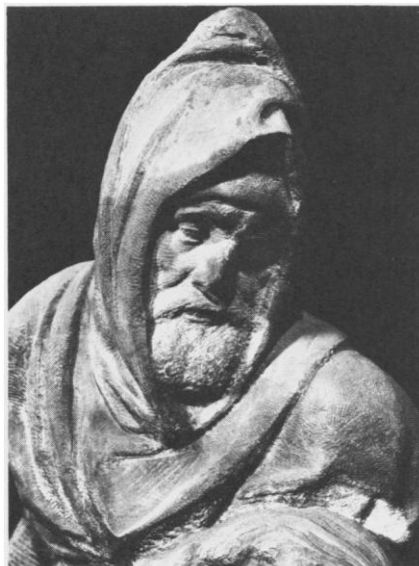


FIG. 8.—Michelangelo, *Pietà*, marble, detail of mourner. Duomo, Florence.

fresco, the psychic resemblance between the carved and the painted figure cannot have escaped him (figs. 7 and 8).

The other "Michelangelo" head—subtly emphasized by the cresting horizon at upper left—belongs to the middle-aged horseman hard behind the equestrian captain.⁴ His likeness, dressed in the artist's characteristic turban, comes too close to authentic Michelangelo portraits to be discounted (figs. 9 and 10).

But this gives us two Michelangelos. And as no man can be in two places at once, scholars have allowed only one or the other to represent Michelangelo's self; or else have dismissed both, since the case for either head as a self-portrait seems compromised by the existence of another pretender. But such arguments proceed from misplaced rationality. Suppose we consider the "irrational" alternative that both identifications are right, and that we are seeing the artist portrayed in the full span of his moral history. The turbaned rider then stands for a younger Michelangelo, and we shall find it significant that his place is under the Roman captain's command.

This Roman is not anonymous. In the Acts of Peter he is named the Prefect Agrippa and appears in a fairly good light: the emperor Nero complained that he had not put Peter to death with greater torment.⁵ And his face too—like a profile incised on a gem—seems familiar. It is kindred to the face which Michelangelo in his youth bestowed on the *David*, the biblical hero to whom he gave all he knew of alluring mas-



FIG. 9.—Copy after Bugiardini's *Portrait of Michelangelo*. Louvre, Paris.



FIG. 10.—Michelangelo, *The Crucifixion of Peter*, detail.

culine beauty. The square-jawed Agrippa, painted almost half a century later, bears the same sovereign pagan features, matured and hardened, but still the face of Michelangelo's early idealism.

The Prefect now assumes a twofold role. On the narrative level, and in relation to Peter, he is the cool man of action, the officer overseeing the execution. But for the anxious rider behind him, whom we identify with Michelangelo, he embodies the graces of pagan antiquity. And the painter has taken care to ensure that the two heads, crested and turbaned, are seen as a pair; for the interval between them is closed by the hand of another, serving as copula. The Prefect, then, not only commands Michelangelo but intervenes between him and Saint Peter.

Our musing is worth pursuing a while longer because it deepens the sense of at least one other action within the picture, that of the youth leading the chorus of witnesses at upper center. Again, at a literal level of interpretation, he is protesting the Apostle's ignominious execution to the Prefect; hence his pointing both ways. But for whose benefit is he pointing? To the Captain in charge of the operation, the victim protagonist hardly needs to be pointed out. The artist has even averted the Captain's head, clear signal that not he is being addressed. Aimed at the Prefect, the gesturing of the chorus leader would remain functionless and inadequate to the occasion. Yet the glare of his eye and his fingers out-thrust at right angles bespeak fierce intensity. They suggest a more terrible possibility—that the chorus leader directs his expostulation not to the

Prefect alone, but to him and his turbaned follower. For he points both to Saint Peter and to where Michelangelo is spending his manhood, as if to say, "They are crucifying the Apostle of Christ, and you keep their company?" The old convert's regret over a misspent life—his poems bemoaning the "fantasy" that had led him to make art his "idol and sovereign"⁶—this internal indictment raking Michelangelo's conscience would then be personified in the chorus leader.

If this reading is true—though beyond proof or disproof—then the whole fresco turns into a chart of the artist's personal trial. It is the descending graph of Michelangelo's destiny that runs, from his early idolization of pagan beauty and art, from the vigorous upper left corner, down the imperious diagonal of the Prefect's commanding arm and on through the transverse beam of the cross, down to his own self again—himself in deepest old age. Arrived at the lower right, he meditates on the death of the Apostle who had denied Christ and repented. And the arms of Saint Peter's cross reach to connect the poles of Michelangelo's life—from his own early denial to his present contrition. The work's ultimate meaning flows in the geometry of its structure.

So much for the reading proposed five years ago—hardly a model of safe methodology; shot through with escalating assumptions. The identification, for instance, of the Ancient as a spiritual self-image is arguable—his beard is longer than Michelangelo's ever grew. The same goes for the turbaned rider, whose beard in the fresco is a villainous red—not Michelangelo's natural color. And a skeptic could claim that the chorus leader's reproach (if reproach was intended) cannot be addressed to the man in the turban since the Prefect gets in the way.⁷ As for the connecting diagonal by which my hypothesis links two phases of the artist's divided self, we have seen our sixteenth-century copyists give it short shrift, and they, if anyone, being participants in Michelangelo's culture, would have grasped its semantic potential. Yet they seem to have thought the diagonal insufficiently meaningful to need stressing, too obvious as a compositional bond, and, in its sinking seesaw effect, undesirable.

Critics of my book voiced more fundamental objections. Sir Ernst Gombrich, reviewing *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* as "a dangerous model to follow," reminded readers of the *New York Review of Books* that I had presented my reading as beyond proof or disproof.⁸ "But," he added, "it is not proof one would like to be offered but documented analogies." And he went on to ask why Vasari, who "to be sure . . . missed certain things and was altogether not a very profound man, but [who] knew Michelangelo quite well and admired him unconditionally," why this same Vasari never referred to "any such painted autobiography as the descent from an earlier to a later self."

I take this rhetorical question to mean that there are limits to the

inventiveness we may safely impute to Michelangelo. If what I credit him with is not duplicated elsewhere (no analogous instance being reported), then my interpretation can only be a misguided attempt to "approximate Michelangelo to artists of our own time whose creations may indeed resemble dreams where personal and public meanings interpenetrate. But history is about the past, not the present," says Gombrich.

Let me for a moment assume that I erred—this would not be a matter of general interest. But what becomes of the observations on which the hypothesis rested? Consider an archaeological parallel: an excavator digs up certain potsherds and assembles them as best he can in a hypothetical structure; and suppose his construction is questioned. What's to be done with those sherds? Shall they be built into a stronger vessel or be plowed back underground? Now the sherds I applied to my *vas interpretationis* are certain data: that Michelangelo's picture lays down a pervasive diagonal, keeps it running through stress and sacrifice, tips its extremities with two self-like figures contrasted as young and old, and so on. These observations have not been invalidated; they remain pieces of Michelangelo. Shall they be barred from consideration and revert to randomness as before? For the implicit result of Gombrich's caution is this: since my perceptions led to a culpable misconstrual, let them be driven from consciousness; one is safer without them. Indeed, Gombrich's article reproduces not Michelangelo's fresco, but the reversed Cavalieri engraving—a substitution whereby the latter's divergences from the original are pronounced inconsequential. And if Cavalieri's dismantling of Michelangelo's rigid diagonal is not felt as a loss, then clearly any interpretation resting on its alleged potency rests on nothing. It then becomes proper to ask by what right a modern heaps meaning on a compositional feature which even contemporary copyists thought expendable.

Yet I persist: for though that diagonal may not have interested a soul since Michelangelo laid it down, I perceive it as an unalterable necessity. Nor would I placate my critics by tapping Vasari; one consults him, of course, but not for permission to see.

And suppose that a symbolic structure resembling a dream "where personal and public meanings interpenetrate" had once been attempted in sixteenth-century art. That attempt will not be so recognized unless someone salutes. Because, as the physicist J. A. Wheeler has put it, "no . . . phenomenon is a phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon."⁹ And once observed, other Michelangelo paintings may unexpectedly bring confirmation. With this prospect in view, I turn to the work immediately antecedent to the decoration of the Cappella Paolina—the *Last Judgment* fresco on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, executed during the years 1536 to 1541 (fig. 11).

The literature on the *Last Judgment* is very large. What shocks one in



FIG. 11.—Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican.

the perusal of it is the prevailing carelessness of observation. There are valiant exceptions, of course, but their rarity proves how much easier it is to read and rehearse one's reading than to use one's eyes and trust what one sees.¹⁰ The fresco's critical history is a classic instance of how an interpretative tradition feeds on itself, and how rarely the object interpreted is permitted to interfere. Through four centuries of continuous exposure, the *Last Judgment* ranked with the world's best-known monuments, incessantly reproduced and described, praised and denounced,

scanned and scrutinized daily by thousands, with detail photographs available for the past hundred years. Yet it was not until 1925 that the face in the flayed skin held by Saint Bartholomew (to the right below Christ) was identified as the artist's self-portrait (figs. 12 and 13).¹¹ Why this delayed recognition? What inhibited the perception, which now seems so overwhelmingly obvious, that the Apostle martyred by excoriation appeared in the fresco as a bald white-bearded figure, holding the skin of another, whose short hair and beard were, like Michelangelo's, black and curly? Was the visual evidence eclipsed by Vasari's silence? Did Vasari as our primary source set the professional norm for what was to be overlooked? And is this why the discovery of the self-portrait had to await an outsider, Francesco La Cava, a physician unconcerned about art-historical rules?¹²

With La Cava's discovery, the flayed skin in the fresco became once again controversial, as it had been when first unveiled. Traditionally, Saint Bartholomew had been represented as a venerable Apostle, content to display a knife in sufficient token of martyrdom. The conceit of doubling his attributes by making him flaunt his own peeled-off hide seems to have struck some of Michelangelo's critics as outlandish and unnecessarily savage.¹³ Yet the motif was not, in fact, new, and the offense to good taste does not seem appreciably greater than that of depicting Saint Lucy with her eyes on a platter. But I suspect—though no one said so outright—that Michelangelo's Catholic critics reacted to something more sinister than a breach of decorum: a faint reek of heresy. For it was the Protestant North that had produced the outstanding precedents for the motif of Saint Bartholomew with the flayed skin in his hands. In drawings, woodcuts, and book illustrations (figs. 14 and 15), Lucas Cranach, Hans Baldung, and others associated with the *luterani* had celebrated the cult of Saint Bartholomew's skin, because that skin was preserved as a principal treasure in the collection of relics assembled in Wittenberg by Luther's protector, the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise.¹⁴ In 1509, the collection had been published with exquisite woodcuts by Cranach, including the skin of Saint Bartholomew's face (fig. 16). And though Frederick never broke with the Catholic Church, and though Luther himself condemned the veneration of relics, yet the link between Saint Bartholomew's skin and the city of Wittenberg, hotbed of heresy, could not be thought away. Since Saint Bartholomew was also a patron of Rome (where his bones had been revered since their last translation in 983 to the Church of S. Bartolomeo all'Isola), what justification was there for Michelangelo's touting of the famous Wittenberg relic? His emphasis on this Northern motif must have struck informed Catholics as a provocation. And his ridiculous fancy in identifying himself with that skin—assuming that the likeness was recognized—would not have blunted its provocative character. Hence, perhaps, the intrusion of the word "Lutheran" in an anonymous blast directed at Michelangelo in 1549.¹⁵

But did anyone in Michelangelo's day recognize the man in the skin? Here the record is inconclusive. Condivi's text makes the skin no more than the token of the saint's own ordeal. But an engraved copy of the *Last Judgment* (by Beatrizet, 1562) has the legend "Michael Angelus Inventor" issue from the skinned portrait as from an alternative signature, alluding apparently to an open secret (fig. 17). More problematic is the painted copy by Marcello Venusti (fig. 18), Michelangelo's close collaborator during the 1540s. The copy (commissioned in 1549 by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese and now in Naples) has been cited as proof that the skinned face was not recognized even by Michelangelo's friends, since Venusti's work introduces an authentic Michelangelo portrait among the resurrected at lower left.¹⁶ This, it is argued, Venusti would not have done, had he known the artist to be already present in effigy. But the evidence can go either way, for Venusti may have contrived an elaborate cover-up. Observing the physiognomic discrepancies between the Apostle and his flayed visage, he reconciled them by blackening Saint Bartholomew's pate and beard, while lengthening the skinned nose and whiskers. In other words, he dissembled Michelangelo's features and mutually approximated the two faces involved. And he may have done this either because the given dissimilarity made no sense, or because he understood that the sense it made were better played down. Meanwhile, the insertion of a conventional author portrait in a decently marginal place might divert attention from Michelangelo's self-display in Christ's entourage.

When the fresco was recent enough to be newsworthy, and while altercation about its libertinism troubled the Vatican, the disparity between the saint and his supposed skin was commented on in writing by at least one observer. He was Vasari's friend and diligent correspondent, Don Miniato Pitti, Prior of the Florentine Olivetans, a learned man with a light touch. In a jovial letter sent on 1 May 1545 to Vasari in Naples, Don Miniato, fresh from a trip to Rome, refers to a visit he paid to the Sistine Chapel. After stating that he preferred the Ceiling to the *Last Judgment*, he adds, as if to mock the accusations hurled at the latter: "Because there are a thousand heresies here, and above all in the beardless skin of Saint Bartholomew, while the skinned one has a long beard; which shows that the skin is not his, etc [*sic*]." ¹⁷

No evidence here that the writer failed in his grasp of this recondite "heresy." His irony seems rather to hint at a matter known to his addressee, but best left unspoken, since the fresco was already overexposed to attacks on the artist's licentiousness. Who knows what lurks in the "etc" at the end of the passage? We are left, at any rate, with these two possibilities: either Vasari failed to recognize the master's self-portrait—which would make him more obtuse than we think he was; or, being cognizant how such egocentricity amidst universal doom confounded "personal and public meanings," he thought it prudent, when writing his



FIG. 12.—Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, detail.



FIG. 13.—Jacopino del Conte, *Portrait of Michelangelo*. Uffizi, Florence.

Michelangelo *Vita*, to divulge less than he knew. As he referred to no “painted autobiography” in the *Crucifixion of Peter*, so he kept silent about the self-portrait in the *Last Judgment*; and nearly four centuries of occultation ensued.

During this period, Michelangelo’s features were emblematic—like those of a Socrates, Dante, or Charles V. Yet his presence in the Sistine *Last Judgment* ceased to be visible because it lacked written certification, and because the visual datum alone was too unexpected: no known analogies prepared one for the paradox of a painter’s self investing Saint Bartholomew’s skin; or, more important, for his presumptuous claim on Christ’s full regard, just when the divine Judge must be having all humankind on his mind. Even those numerous writers on the *Last Judgment* who focused on the Apostle missed Michelangelo’s conspicuous likeness—overlooked even the incongruity between the saint and his skin—expounding instead what it was logical to expect.¹⁸ L. L. Chapon’s little book on the *Last Judgment* (1892) pretended to identify some eighty of the characters represented—from Esau to Cesare Borgia, managing one direct hit in the identification of Savonarola; but Michelangelo’s likeness escaped him.¹⁹ And Michelangelo specialists—Steinmann’s Saint Bartholomew holds “die eigene Haut”—scored no better.²⁰



FIG. 14.—Lucas Cranach, *Saint Bartholomew*, woodcut. Geisberg 573.



FIG. 15.—Hans Baldung Grien, *Saint Bartholomew*, drawing. Kupferstichkabinett, Basel.



FIG. 16.—Lucas Cranach, *Reliquary of Saint Bartholomew*. Woodcut from the *Wittenberger Heiligtumsbuch* (1509).

It is disconcerting, in retrospect, to see so great a Michelangelo scholar as Karl Frey wrestle the problem only to go down in defeat. Frey was the first to publish Miniato Pitti's letter to Vasari and to comment on it at length. Pitti's "thousand heresies" he understands to be meant tongue in cheek, "scherzosamente," and he praises the Prior's astuteness in catching the disparity between the bearded Apostle and his beardless skin. But Frey attributes the observation to that "monkish bantering superficiality which in those times held sway in matters religious"—and promptly misunderstands it. Don Miniato had offered both an observation and a conclusion: he had noticed that the bearded Apostle held a skin with a beardless face; he had concluded that the skin must be another's. But though it was clearly the conclusion that mattered, Frey pretends that Don Miniato had faulted the Saint Bartholomew figure solely for retaining its beard after excoriation. This deflection enables him to exonerate Michelangelo on the grounds that the face in the skin does show a bit of a beard; and that, anyway, the skinning was thought of symbolically, not realistically. Finally, in a desperate appeal to



FIG. 17.—Nicolas Beatrizet after Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, engraving, detail.

eschatological pogonotrophy, Frey suggests how Michelangelo might have silenced his critics by pointing out that the saint's protracted sojourn in Paradise would have allowed him to grow a fresh beard along with new skin in time for Doomsday.²¹ Since Frey saw no purpose in Michelangelo's differentiation between the saint and his skin, he must either minimize it or explain it away. The one unavailable recourse was the acknowledgment of Don Miniato's conclusion: that the flayed skin pertained to a different person. Two years later (1925), La Cava published his paper, *Il Volto di Michelangelo scoperto nel Giudizio Finale*.

The response to La Cava's "sensational discovery" was instantaneous. Outstanding scholars, notably Wittkower, welcomed it with enthusiasm and congratulated the finder.²² And the art-historical world by and large has accepted that rumpled ragface as Michelangelo's only certain self-portrait. A few voices rose in vain opposition, and skeptics demurred as late as 1942, when Angeleri argued without success that, since Michelangelo's contemporaries had not recognized the self-portrait, those who would so identify it four centuries later must be hallucinating.²³

The self-portrait was no sooner identified than Corrado Ricci built it into a small private drama.²⁴ If the skin represented the artist, then, he proposed, the man holding it could be none other than Aretino, whose features, as portrayed in Titian's painting at the Pitti Palace, have much in common with Michelangelo's Saint Bartholomew. And since Aretino did chide the artist in one famous diatribe, Michelangelo may well have thought himself "flayed" by the unscrupulous publicist. The hypothesis had some flaws: Aretino's attack did not come until 1545—about seven years after the Bartholomew would have been painted. And it is hard to accept an identity glide that invests Aretino with the dignity of an Apostle. Furthermore, as pointed out to me by Dr. Sheila Schwartz, the instrument of the saint's martyrdom cannot also be the tool by which he

FIG. 18.—Marcello Venusti after Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, painting. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.



himself administers torture; an interpretation, however attractive, should not contradict the literal sense of an image. Nevertheless, the hypothesis was widely accepted,²⁵ even by Tolnay, who wrote: "The brutal figure of Saint Bartholomew, bearing the knife with which he has skinned Michelangelo, shows a strange resemblance, as has already been observed, to Pietro Aretino, who was a real castigator of the artist. . . . The [written] correspondence between Michelangelo and Aretino would explain sufficiently the role which the artist reserved for the latter in his fresco."²⁶ Incredible that these lines appeared as late as 1960 in a standard five-volume Michelangelo monograph. The writer is willing to cast an Apostle of Christ in the role of Michelangelo's executioner; willing to make the divine Judge—whom he sees dispatching Michelangelo into hell—join forces with Aretino. In Tolnay's reading, the affliction which Michelangelo would here claim to have undergone is consummated by Christ. What are we to think Christ is doing? Cursing Michelangelo for allowing Aretino to flay him?

The Saint Bartholomew-Aretino equation (unworkable if only because Aretino enjoyed a full head of hair until his hilarious death) has quietly dropped out of recent discussions. But it left behind a habit of explaining the flayed skin in the fresco as a reference to hardships endured, a habit instilled originally by the wishful secularism of the past century. Modern scholia continue to gloss the flayed portrait as a grim joke or, if in dead earnest, as a protestation of personal martyrdom in the cause of art.²⁷ Such interpretations isolate the shed skin from the rest of the fresco and from the general proceedings of Resurrection and Judgment. Overlooking the context, they assimilate the self-portrait to the Romantic mythology of the suffering artist, *le peintre maudit*.

Now it is undeniable that Michelangelo was a habitual complainer. But by the mid-1530s, his Christianity and his anxiety to be saved for the Vision of God were authentic and urgent. Reading his poetry and the facts of his life, we are left in no doubt that he believed in the reality of the Last Things. And what does such a believer say to the wound-flashing Christ of the Second Coming? Our secularizing interpreters would have Michelangelo say, "You're telling me, look how *I* suffered!" This is not the Michelangelo of the sonnets, nor that of the fresco.²⁸

But if all these interpretations went wrong, where does one turn for right guidance? Where but to the work itself? Let us agree, to begin with, that we are not shown, as *Life Magazine* long ago phrased it, a Saint Bartholomew who "holds his own mortal skin, in which Michelangelo whimsically painted a distorted portrait of himself."²⁹ The face was sloughed with the rest of the skin and goes with it. What we see is a Saint Bartholomew with another's integument in his hand. We next consider an aspect of the self-portrait which even La Cava left out of account—its relative siting. This has to matter since the portrait lies in the path of

Christ's imminent action. More than that, it lies on a diagonal that traverses the fresco like a heraldic bend chief to base—from left top to right bottom (fig. 19). The twofold competence thus assumed by the self-portrait—in its concrete location and in the range of its influence—is something to marvel at. A hangdog face flops to one side, helpless and limp. But the tilt of its axis projected upward across the field strikes the apex of the left-hand lunette, the uppermost point of the fresco. And if, departing once again from the skin's facial axis, we project its course netherward, we discover the line produced to aim straight at the fresco's lower right corner. Such results do not come by chance. To put it literally, letting metaphor fall where it may: it is the extension of the self's axis that strings the continuum of heaven and hell.

There is more. Upward from the face in the skin, the passage of the diagonal seeks, like a mystic's itinerary, the most intimate contact with Christ. Inevitably, the line crosses some forms, such as Saint Bartholomew's torso, without marking significant stops. But can it be unintended that the line runs unerringly to the wound in Christ's side—the source of the saving Sacraments?³⁰ Higher still, the line traces the diameter of the Crown of Thorns, displayed by an angel naïant in the left-hand lunette. (We suddenly understand why this Crown is held forth ostensibly at full circle, whereas copyists such as Venusti, Della Casa, and Bonasone thought it more interesting to tilt it into a perspectival ellipse.) Finally—after intersecting that point on the triumphant Cross where the head of Christ rested at the Crucifixion—the line touches the vault of heaven at its visible peak, that is to say, the topmost reach of the fresco. In other words, the deceptively feeble sway of the face in the skin generates a diagonal axis that climbs to the summit point of the vision.

Hellward bound, this same trajectory links three foci of deepening degradation. Down one step from the abject self-image, it pinpoints the stricken shameface of the first of the reprobate, Michaelangelo's grue-somest image of man rejected. He may be one anonymous sinner, but he looms in the fresco like an emblem of guilt, his thighs clutched by demons, snake-gnawed, impacted by shame. And verging forth from this castaway, the deadset, hellbent itinerary—solidifying near bottom in a figure falling from Charon's barque—plunges to the ultimate abomination, the engaged groin of the Prince of Hell, so-called Minos, his penis berthed in a serpent's mouth (figs. 20 and 21).

In the original fresco this unseemly detail has been long covered up by overpainting, and we would lack knowledge of it were it not for the early copies and for one scurrilous sonnet *dell'epoca*, still unpublished.³¹ The art-historical literature observes silent censorship on the subject, endorsing the spirit of the Council of Trent which ordered the cover-up of the fresco's obscenities. You would think Michelangelo had defaced the altar wall of the papal chapel with a lewd provocation—like school-boy smut on a public wall, which one punishes by inattention till they get



FIG. 19.—Michelangelo, *Last Judgment* (with Line of Fate).

around to cleaning it up. As for the rare published references to this feature, they prove that it has not been frankly observed, let alone pondered: for the authors agree in declaring Minos' genitals to be bitten, thinking, no doubt, of the painful reptiles in Dante's *Inferno*. But those are instruments of the Devil who would not maltreat their own lord—a Prince of Hell, incorporeal in substance, does not undergo the physical pains he bestows. And Michelangelo's so-called Minos does not, in fact, show the least sign of unease. He stands snugly wrapped in his snake. He stands snugly wrapped in his snake, which his right hand sustains in position, and entrusts his private parts to its mouthing. Between them, no enmity; for it is a befriending serpent

that hugs him, female to his own sex, the lodgement of the phallus received defining the spouse. In a satanic inversion of sacred marriage, the consort's caress betrays a connubial tryst, unholy nuptials perpetually consummated. Michelangelo's Antichrist, mounted over the Sacristy door in odious prominence and proximity, is an icon of naked evil, of corruption wed to the serpent's mouth, fount of poison.

But what chiefly concerns us here is the alignment, the topical definition of the motif. Is it not strange to see this bestial fellation trued with Christ's wound and crown, and again with the artist's self-image, bobbing the line that plummets from peak to base?³²

At this point, some of my cautious colleagues are tossing their heads, protesting that one can always crisscross a picture with lines that are bound, sooner or later, to strike points of interest. To still their qualms, I propose the following operation: apply an inch rule to our diagonal on a good-sized reproduction (mine, purchased some years ago at the Vatican, hangs five feet tall). You discover—I am still awed at the sight of it—that the midpoint of the face in the skin marks the centerpoint of the bend, exactly halfway between the highest and lowest points of the traversing diagonal. Again, such precise ratios do not materialize accidentally, and no one who has ever constructed a picture will doubt that these metric relations were planned. In fact, the centrality of the shed

FIG. 20.—Cherubino Alberti after Michelangelo, figure from *Last Judgment*, engraving.

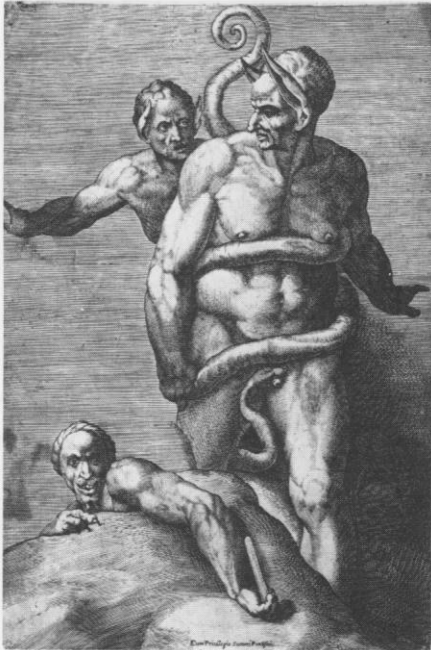


FIG. 21.—Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, detail.



skin on that two-way track must have been envisioned by Michelangelo before the painting began. No late afterthought could have made his mournful visage bisect as well as engender the universal diagonal in prolongation of its own axis. Within the overall composition—which we normally read as a system of stratified symmetry—the included self was to constitute a secret, alternative center.

But why as a flayed skin? The fresco contains intimations that Michelangelo shared Juan de Valdes' belief in the "Resurrection of the Just," a heterodox doctrine widely held in the 1530s in that circle of evangelical Catholics to whom Michelangelo was attached. The doctrine reserved resurrection for the righteous alone, while the wicked, denied the friendship of God, were extinguished.³³ Where, in this scheme of things, would Michelangelo place himself? His vision of the Last Judgment arrests an uncertain instant when, among those repossessed of their flesh, one man alone remains unrestored, a dejected sheath lacking body; for whom Saint Bartholomew pleads as his intercessor: "Do not cast him away; let him too resurrect into eternal life." The image evokes words from the Book of Job which Michelangelo, in his youth, would have read beneath an abbreviated *Last Judgment* on Bertoldo di Giovanni's medal for a bishop of the Medici family (fig. 22). On the medal, too, the Last Judgment was referred to one individual's hope. Its legend—ET IN CARNE MEA VIDEBO DEUM SALVATOREM MEUM—derived from those verses in Job which Aquinas cites as proof of bodily resurrection: "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and in the last day I shall rise out of the earth. And I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh I shall see my God. This hope is laid up in my bosom."³⁴



FIG. 22.—Bertoldo di Giovanni, *The Last Judgment*, reverse of medal of Filippo de' Medici. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Christ's glance and gesture direct themselves pointblank at the wretched likeness of Michelangelo's self—the whole cosmic drama collapses upon his destiny. Not because the artist thinks himself foremost amongst mankind, but because the Last Judgment conceived as more than a fable, and more than a warning to others, is real only to the extent that the man who tells of it knows himself to be the first on trial. This is why the detritus of the artist's life usurps Christ's attention. It *had* to be Michelangelo who was first in line, because the narration was his. Or put it this way: the Last Judgment—as I believe Michelangelo pondered it—is not staged for generic mankind but for each self within mankind. And how shall this eachness be tested but on this only-known body in its own dear corruptible hide?

Thus the question whether the flayed skin represents the artist in fact, and whether Michelangelo's friends had so identified it, fades into relative insignificance. Saint Bartholomew holds a skin which is not his but another's. And more important than that other's identity is the consequence of its location. The issue at the instant of falling judgment is whether one rotted vesture is to be fleshed or not, salvaged or dropped. Nothing in the character of this worthless rag recommends it for grace; gravity, which would pull it down, is all it contributes. But the uncertainty of the outcome is implied by the indeterminacy of Christ's gesture, by the intercession of the Apostle, and by the skin's centered position on one beam of destiny discharged from its axis two ways. The predicament is that of every believer. And if Michelangelo, by dint of a physiognomic resemblance, projected himself into it (as the poet Crashaw would do a hundred years later³⁵), the universality of the symbol remains undiminished.

Inevitably, this coincidence of private and public meaning—and of meaning engendered by collocation—surpassed the comprehension of the artist's contemporaries, Vasari included. The numerous sixteenth-century copyists of the *Last Judgment* paid little heed to the pervading bend as a compositional feature, and none to the significant linkage of stations charted upon it. Entirely unsuspected was the centrality of the portrait on the diagonal. The copies see the design governed by only two general principles: axiality and stratification. That is to say, they acknowledge a bilateral symmetry about a perpendicular dropped from corbel to altar, and they preserve the terracing in four superposed tiers: above a thin stratum of earth and an aerial zone of transition comes the realm of the blessed, topped by a heaven of angels—each zone preserving a perceptible correspondence of left and right.³⁶ Apart from respecting this layered symmetry, the copyists treat Michelangelo's composition as elastic and episodic—nothing lost if some units are moved about. Say that the copyists of the *Last Judgment*—in common with literary detractors and panegyrists—responded only to a middle range of phenomena: they saw the *dramatis personae*, their groupings and clusters, their motions and famous foreshortenings, and so forth. But they missed

the artist's intent at its extremes: in its calculated refinement and in its largesse. The minute adjustments that enabled Michelangelo to maintain, for example, a precise ambiguity in the posture of Christ—this lay demonstrably outside their ken.³⁷ And they missed as surely the larger connections—the far-flung ligatures crossing the field, the changes of scale that cause space to fold in and out, or the fresco's bold interaction at every juncture with the given architectural set.³⁸ Nowhere in the sixteenth century (nor since, for that matter) do we find an awareness that location in Michelangelo's compositions is stringent, not loose or approximate; that a unit emplaced derives operative power from its position, like a chesspiece in play.

The placement of the face in the skin has far-reaching consequences. First: it removes lingering doubts about the correctness of an identification resting on likeness alone; for it would be contrary to Michelangelo's essentially anatomical sense of stress to articulate a median or major junction with a nonentity. Second: the integration of the motif with the vision in its entirety assures us that the self-portrait is no mere "signature," or grim joke, or autobiographic aside recalling ill-usage by Aretino, or more general complaint about life's tribulations. Any interpretation that fails to locate the portrait at the nub of the compositional-ideological structure misses the point. Third: it appears that Michelangelo injects a self-image into a public work where he feels fatally implicated. The degree of actual likeness is variable.³⁹

Fourth: the very positioning of the self in the *Last Judgment* fresco is metaphoric and produces something like a continuous emission of meaning. Without straying from the visual evidence, we may say, for instance, that the zoning of the wall surface keeps heaven far distant from earth and hell, but that the self, by virtue of its linear potential, draws them together. And there is more. Christ and the soul on trial emerge as correlative centers. And the respective natures of the systems they centralize differ significantly: Christ at the hinge of a coordinate cruciform structure, the labile self centering an unstable obliquity, and so on. The dispositions in space convert gladly into theological propositions because they are framed in that same ground whence religious thought too takes its rise.

Fifth: since the fresco pins Michelangelo's self between the remote poles of a diagonal, it becomes less improbable that the work of the next decade, his last fresco in the Cappella Paolina, should find him at the termini of a diagonal that reads once more as a line of fate. And the persistence of such structural thinking in Michelangelo's work is confirmed by the one fresco cycle we have yet to consider—the Sistine Ceiling (1508–12), begun a quarter century before the *Last Judgment*, when the artist was thirty-three.

The Ceiling's long central rectangle, a simulated stone cornice

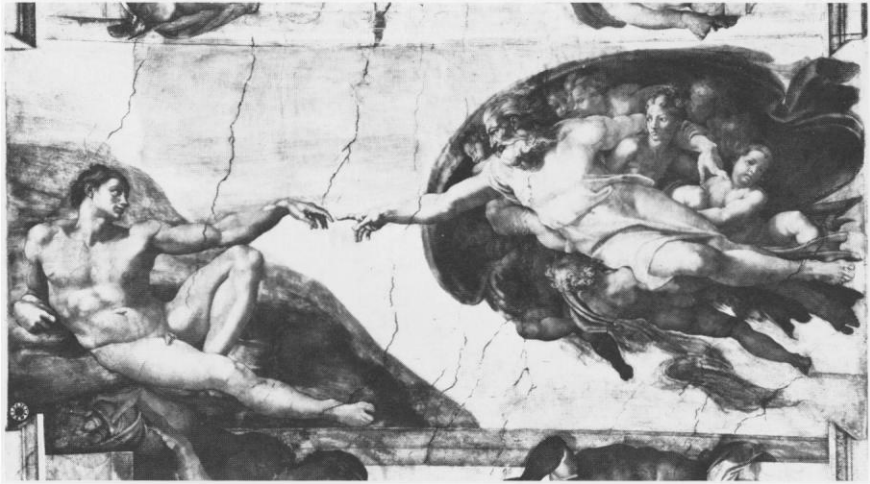


FIG. 23.—Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican.

crossed by nine rectangular bays, contains scenes from the Old Testament, wide and contracted frames alternating. Thematically, the series falls into three triptychs. The chronological sequence begins over the altar with the creation of nature. It ends toward the Chapel entrance in three scenes from the story of Noah. The middle triad tells the story of Adam and Eve, and a word must be said about each of its parts.

The *Creation of Adam* is the best known (fig. 23). It has lately become as banal as any image whatever, if only because, like Leonardo's *Last Supper*, it is continually being adapted to political satires, lampoons, advertisements, and the like. These travesties (which I collect with grim relish) deserve careful study for what they reveal about the psychology of perception—not one of them recognizes that Michelangelo's figure of the Creator is ambidexterous. Since the fresco is famous for God's right-handed reach toward Adam, no more than His right hand is noticed—as if the left were idly thrown over the back of a chair. But Michelangelo's bimane figures need watching at both extremities, and we should be missing the better half if we ignored God's alternate arm, which, without lassitude or diminution of power, embraces a winsome girl.

Unfortunately, the identity of the embraced is still in dispute because Vasari failed to single her out. His description acknowledges only "a group of nude angels of tender age"; the young female under God's reserved arm is consigned as one of "alcuni putti" to a nondescript status, there to abide incognito from Vasari's day until about 1900.⁴⁰

But see what she does. Crouched in the posture of the familiar *Vénus accroupi*, she eyes God's latest invention with the keenest interest and reacts with a left-handed gesture, gripping the heavy paternal arm that weighs on her shoulder. Is she holding on to it in the shock of her vision,



FIG. 24.—Michelangelo, *The Temptation and Expulsion from Paradise*, detail of the *Temptation*, fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican.

or wanting to shake it off? The ambivalence of the gesture implies woman's relation to the father as she assumes her relation to man.

And there is more, for being all-woman, she relates as well to the child. God's far-reaching arm, yoking her huddled form, comes to rest on a powerful putto reclined in Adamic pose, a child overscaled for his infant years and gravely serious—the only person within these biblical histories in eye contact with the beholder. Michelangelo surely meant him to represent the Second Adam, so that the span of God's arms becomes coextensive with the redemptive history of the race.⁴¹ And the

Child's intimate nesting near to the woman's limbs makes him the son of Eve, son of the First Eve as of the Second. For the First is the type of the other: as theologians used to point out, the "Ave" by which Mary is hailed is but "Eva" reversed. Accordingly, we do better by Michelangelo if we distinguish the young female under God's arm from Vasari's "alcuni putti" to recognize Eve in her—Eve as yet uncreated, whom Adam aborning foresees, as we read in Saint Augustine.

The middle panel, which is also the midpoint of the whole Ceiling, depicts the *Creation of Eve*, the woman marking its center. At the bidding of God she steps forth from the body of sleeping Adam, her childlike trust strangely at odds with her ripeness. There follows the last of the three central panels, representing sequentially the *Temptation* and *Expulsion from Paradise* (fig. 24).

The Eve in the *Temptation* scene, resting at ease between Adam's thighs, has grown remarkably debonaire. Without discommoding herself, she turns centerward and humors the serpent with a complaisant hand by taking the proffered fruit, rendered here as a pair of figs. Nothing better confirms her insouciance than the way she has of leaning on her right arm, of which only the hand, seemingly idle, is visible. But if one studies this hand—a detail almost too small to discern from the Chapel floor—one discovers it to be strained in a manner incompatible with relaxation: a stiff middle finger, stretched straight between thumb



FIG. 25.—Anonymous sixteenth-century painter after Michelangelo, *The Temptation*, fresco. Palazzo Sacchetti, Rome.

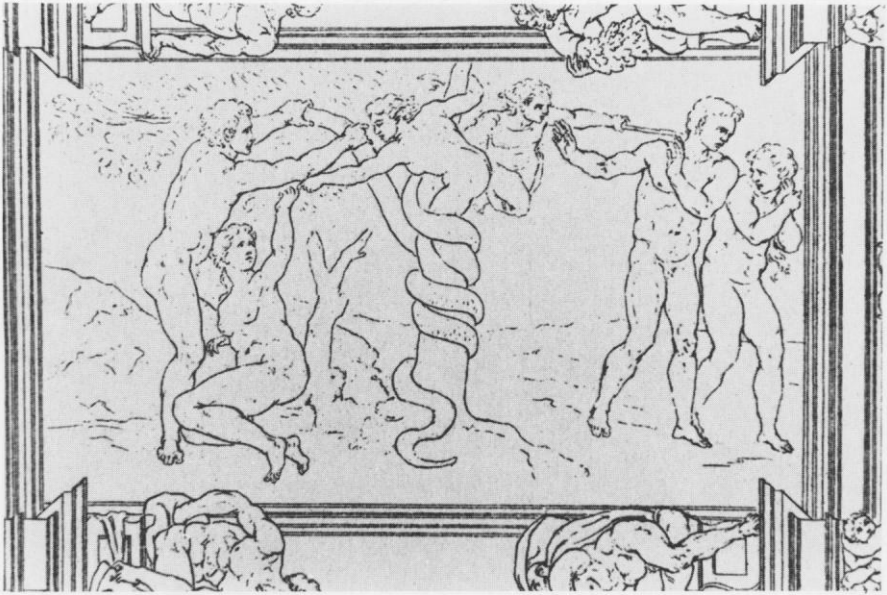


FIG. 26.—Domenico Cunego after Michelangelo, *The Temptation*, engraving.

and flexed index, points back to herself. If Michelangelo was not being thoughtless, then this rigid finger is a phallic allusion. At the instant of Original Sin, as if by unconscious reflex or premonition, Eve designates her receptive womb.⁴²

Before we speculate further on this fateful gesture, it is well to cast a glance at the copies, which turn out to be surprisingly few. The left half of the fresco was included in no engraving until the late eighteenth century. And only one painted copy—part of a decorative frieze in the Palazzo Sacchetti, Rome—comes down from the Cinquecento (fig. 25). The frieze is hackwork, a potpourri of crude adaptations from various Michelangelo frescoes. But in the *Temptation* scene the painter has been at pains to clear our first parents of any suspicion of impropriety in thought or deed. His Eve is taught to keep a more decorous distance; her serpent's gift takes the form of apples, not figs; and her relaxed middle finger stops pointing. The anonymous copyist may well have been the first to decide that Eve's unemployed hand needed correction.

It received harsher punishment in the large documentary engraving of the Sistine Ceiling executed by Domenico Cunego in 1795 (fig. 26). Here Eve's shriveled hand recoils like a guilty thing, as if someone had slapped it. Alternative bowdlerizations occur in a nineteenth-century print and in a recently advertized commercial pastiche (figs. 27 and 28); these four being all the copies I know. Thus from the sixteenth century



FIG. 27.—Anonymous nineteenth-century artist after Michelangelo, *The Temptation*, engraving.

FIG. 28.—Advertisement with figure of Eve from Michelangelo's *Temptation*.



until the present, no copyist was willing to give offense by translating Michelangelo's text unmitigated. And I have found no evidence of any writer noticing this detail or, if he did, thinking it fit to mention. It was not cited in print until the winter of 1975–76, when I published fifteen responses from a class of graduate students on the assigned topic of "Eve's Idle Hand."⁴³

The students' findings, taken in aggregate, proposed that Eve's ominous gesture could be read on three levels of meaning. At the first level, her focused finger denotes the concupiscence into which Adam and Eve will lapse through the withdrawal of grace attending Original Sin. At the second level, the gesture foretells Eve's motherhood and the travail about to be laid on her by an offended God. At the third, this first woman, in whom is prefigured the Second Eve, presages the role of her woman's womb in the plan of salvation. The finger addresses that port of sin which, by grace of that other Eve, becomes the gate of redemption. Nor do these three levels of signification exclude one another. What is excluded, and I believe once and for all, is insignificance.

It was at this point that Francis Naumann submitted an observation under the title "The Three Faces of Eve." I quote from his exposition: "Following the direction of Eve's middle finger across the three central frames of the Ceiling, we find that it points directly to the other two figures of Eve as yet untouched by sin. Only the fallen, outcast Eve is

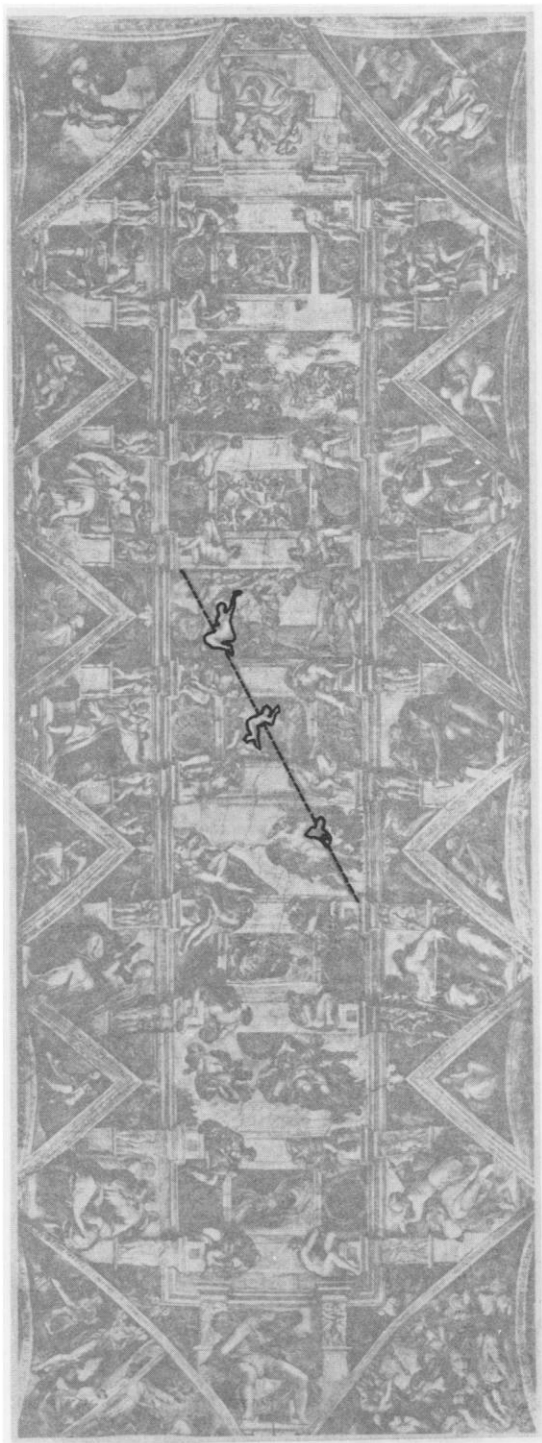


FIG. 29.—Michelangelo, the Sistine Ceiling (with overlay by Francis Naumann).

excluded; whereas the chosen three are linked by a single straight line" (fig. 29).

A straight running bond even here? Naumann's "straight line" differs from the two diagonals already discussed in that it traverses three contiguous frames rather than one composed unity. But perhaps the very existence of this unsuspected connective reveals something of Michelangelo's approach to the special problem posed by the Ceiling—its rigid framework and serial narrative structure. He had ordered the ground to be frescoed as a system of transverse and longitudinal axes, allocating one bay to each picture within the chain. To this extent, the system was additive, geometric and inorganic. But then a latent diagonal, a train of thought, as it were, glides across the three central panels: a movement, a countervailing principle of animation by which the staccato of rectangular frames attains an inward inflection akin to organic motion, like anatomical contrapposto. The Ceiling's midriff is crossed by a trajectory that confirms the emergent Eve at the omphalic center. For the rest, Naumann's diagonal linking of the three Eves anticipates that fateful bend which, three and four decades later, reappears in Michelangelo's work, laden with tragic personal meaning.

Lastly, a picture in London known since 1857 as the *Manchester Madonna*—a work whose attribution has been contested for over a century (fig. 30). The painting was never finished: the angelic pair at left exist only in outline; the Virgin's mantle, only as underpainting; and the medium is tempera, unlike the oils used in Michelangelo's subsequent panel paintings (the London *Entombment* and the *Doni Tondo* in Florence). But though Michelangelo's oeuvre contains nothing quite like it, no alternative attribution has proved convincing, and the attempt to postulate a hypothetical "Master of the Manchester Madonna" has long since foundered. The work combines passages of haunting beauty and delicacy with certain marks of naiveté that would be fully appropriate to a genius still in his teens. After decades of deepening admiration, I am convinced that the picture is Michelangelo's.⁴⁴

Characteristic of his imagination is the fusion of the seven-figure group in a solid, relief-like slab, almost perfectly square. And it is characteristic again that this "slab" yields, on a second glance, to ambiguity: the angelic pairs at the sides are so staggered in depth as to suggest a semicircular grouping about the sacred figures at center. The latter are surrounded by the seraphic presences as the altar is by its apse.

Also characteristic of Michelangelo is the rendering of the scene as a nascent event. At right, two wistful angels study a scroll, presumably the scroll soon to be taken up by the little Saint John, bearing his message *Ecce Agnus Dei*. Thus is stated the foreboding of sacrificial death. The Virgin—assuming that the painter followed the traditional account of her reading habits—has been meditating Isaiah's prophecy of the In-

carnation. The Child's action, which reads superficially as a reaching up for the book, is doubly charged. Is the boy climbing up or stepping down, backward? Reaching up, his hand would be missing its aim as it passes between two pages. More probable that the hand lay on the page, expounding what is to come—and is now sliding down. The first part of the prophecy is about to be realized: let the page turn. Observe that the boy's left hand does not clutch at the Mother's dress to facilitate climbing, but is ingeniously disengaged by grasping a fistful of his own garment. And the hanging fold of the Virgin's mantle, which supports his left foot, is not a rung so much as a symbol of manifest filiation—as the hanging fold is again in Michelangelo's *Bruges Madonna*, where the Child, issuing from the Mother, prepares to set foot on earth. The boy's motion, then, appears programmed both ways. What we initially read as an upward tread tending inward becomes a step down, away from shared center. The Mother-Son group, conceived in monolithic integrity, foreshadows a separation, a departure to which the Virgin, her upper body gently withdrawing to left, gives melancholy consent.⁴⁵ It is as though, in their somber foreknowledge, the Passion were present already. And as the motion of the Christ Child indicates whence he came, so the action of the little Saint John, bending his knee to step forth, portends the next phase. For all its relief-slab stability, the work is astir, inly troubled, a history more than a still.

Most remarkable is the activating diagonal within the close-knit symmetrical schema of uprights and horizontals.⁴⁶ Launched from the upper left by an angel's hand laid about a friend's shoulder, the diagonal slides down the precipitous tilt of the open book, then flows through the arm and trunk of the Christ Child toward Saint John's bending knee, the imminent stride of the forerunner gazing at us.⁴⁷ Once again, a line of destiny descending from left to right, the diagonal of a square; geometric design and divine counsel coincident.

The *Manchester Madonna* was created by a very young Michelangelo. Setting a lifelong pattern for the interpenetration of personal and public meanings, he bestowed on the facing angel and on the Virgin herself his own broken nose. But the pervading diagonal, though it enters here as the form of necessity, bears as yet no personal connotation. And in one other respect the line of fate in this youthful work differs from its later manifestations: it results from volitional gestures—a collaboration of bodies united in common cause generates the descending diagonal. In the frescoes of the artist's maturity, the diagonal grows incorporeal, no longer constituted by bodies but prefixed and determinant of their positions. On the Sistine Ceiling, created some twenty years after the London picture, the disembodied diagonal is an indicator, a tie between three prelapsarian phases, the sign of an identity strung through sequential moments. A quarter century later, in the *Last Judgment*, the diagonal lifeline is more intimately appropriated. Along with its vital formative



FIG. 30.—Michelangelo, *The Manchester Madonna*, painting. National Gallery, London.

function, it operates as a moral-theological vector—its descent charting the artist's consciousness of demerit, its ascent, his Christian hope.

In these three instances, the diagonal moves on the flat plane of the picture, like the connecting stroke of a capital N, traced bendwise across the field. In the final fresco of the *Crucifixion of Peter*, the line becomes multidimensional, issuing from a point upper left, deep in receding space, deep in time past.⁴⁸ The diagonal arrives as an oncoming movement, seeking the immanent foreground at lower right, the tense present. Spatial advance doubles as temporal metaphor, and the dissipated self-portrait—phased and disjointed, sometime mounted, now footsore and weary—defines the polarity of a life. Without disturbing the order of things, without interfering in the narration, without violence of displacement, the artist becomes omnipresent.

1. So far as I know, it was Wölfflin who first cited a deviant replica as an expression of explicit criticism. In his *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe* (1915), he reproduces a baroque relief copy of Raphael's *Disputa* fresco to show how the axial symmetry of the original was modified into an excentric design by a copyist who thought Raphael's system too static. This example, which I came across more than three decades ago, has been, I suspect, my unacknowledged methodological model. Copies as a form of articulate criticism are used in my discussion of Michelangelo's *Roman Pietà* in "The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo's Pietàs," in *Studies in Erotic Art*, ed. Theodore Bowie (New York, 1970), pp. 231–33. The method was more fully developed in my essay on "Leonardo's *Last Supper*," *Art Quarterly* 36 (1973); and again in an article entitled "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America* 63 (November–December 1975): 49–63. Even where copies are comparatively few, I have in two recent cases found them revealing. See my *Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane: A Study in Multiple Form and Architectural Symbolism* (New York, 1977), p. 438; and "Guercino's *Saint Petronilla*," in *Studies in Italian Art and Architecture*, ed. Henry A. Millon (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 225.

2. The painted copy, 34 by 34 inches, is cited in Charles de Tolnay's *Michelangelo: The Final Period* (Princeton, N.J., 1960), p. 145, as in a private collection, New York. It was purchased by a New York art dealer, Sidney Orefice, in Madrid in 1955 and has been repeatedly published in the daily press (*New York Times*, 20 June 1963, p. 35, and *New York World-Telegram*, 6 December 1964) with partial claims to authenticity. The late Ludwig Goldscheider published it as the master's modello for the fresco (*Michelangelo's Last Painting* [London, 1968]). Disregarding questions of quality, it is demonstrable on at least five separate counts that the panel depends on the Cavalieri engraving, fig. 4. (1) Like the engraving, the panel shows six lances at upper left, not Michelangelo's eight. (2) The transverse beam is curtailed, as in the engraving (cf. p. 414, above). (3) The floated half-figure behind the cross is brought down to the ground by means of a fluted skirt (cf. p. 414, above). (4) The Ancient at lower right has room for an extra step underfoot (cf. p. 414, above). (5) The "hyphen hand" between the helmeted and the turbaned head at upper left is eliminated, as in the engraving. Some, though not all, of the colors follow the original, or an earlier painted replica now lost. The copyist may have seen the fresco and taken some color notes before working the picture up from the print.

3. L. Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* (New York and London, 1975), pp. 53–55.

4. A horizon cresting behind a significant foreground figure is a traditional means of emphasis in Italian narrative art.

5. Acts of Peter, chap. 39, in Edgar Heenecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1965), 2:320.

6. Michelangelo sonnet, 1554: "Onde l'affettuosa fantasia, / Che l'arte mi fece idolo e monarca, / Conosco or ben com'era d'error carica, / E quel ch'a mal suo grado ogni uom desia."

7. Barry Weller's review of Michelangelo's *Last Paintings* in "Images of the Renaissance" (*Modern Language Notes* 92 [1977]: 1079) refers to this "specific detail" as the "least persuasive."

8. E. H. Gombrich, "Talking of Michelangelo," *The New York Review of Books*, 20 January 1977, p. 19.

9. J. A. Wheeler, quoted in *The New York Review of Books*, 17 May 1979, p. 40.

10. Literary commonplaces regarding the *Last Judgment*, which are not borne out by the visual evidence, include the anger of Christ, the timorous shrinking of the Virgin, the vindictive mood of the martyr saints, and the pessimistic, purely punitive character of the event. These and other entrenched errors are discussed in "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," cited above, n. 1. A typical instance, not hitherto noted, concerns the angels in the lunettes with the instruments of the Passion. Once described as straining under the ponderous weight of the cross and the whipping post, a literary tradition of citing their puffing and heaving takes hold until, by the late seventeenth century, Michelangelo is faulted for not understanding that angels ought to perform such tasks without effort. Meanwhile, in the fresco, not one of the angels does anything useful in the way of functional work. Cross and column are buoyant and self-sustained—the angels sport with them in an ecstatic dance.

11. Francesco La Cava, *Il Volto di Michelangelo scoperto nel Giudizio Finale* (Bologna, 1925).

12. The suggestion that his medical training gave Dr. La Cava an edge over mere art historians was made by Achille Bertini Calosso ("Ritratti nel 'Giudizio Universale' di Michelangiolo," in *Michelangiolo Buonarroti nel IV Centenario del "Giudizio Universale"* [Florence, 1942], p. 51): "Grandissimo è stato il merito del La Cava di avere ritrovato ciò che molti cercavano indarno e di avere riconosciuto ciò che pochi forse avrebbero saputo ravvisare, guidato da uno spirito di osservazione e da un senso delle forme, fatti più acuti dalla sua professione di medico." Cf. Richard Hoffman (*Michelangelo: Das jüngste Gericht* [Augsburg, 1929], p. 20): "Millionen von Menschen haben . . . das unsterbliche Werk bis ins kleinste nach allen Einzelheiten hin betrachtet und studiert, da machte der italienische Anatom La Cava diese wichtige Entdeckung." On the other hand, Tolnay (*The Final Period*, pp. 118–19) claims to have "made the same identification independently in the winter of 1924–25, communicating his discovery to his friends."

13. Thus Johannes Molanus (*De Picturis et Imaginibus Sacris* [Louvain, 1570]) quoted in David Freedberg, "Johannes Molanus on Provocative Paintings," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 34 (1971): 231 n.13: "It is excessively crude and wanton to depict St. Bartholomew totally flayed like a monster of old, . . . [as in] the picture which Michelangelo painted in Rome in the pope's private chapel showing Bartholomew at the Last Judgment holding his own skin." Cf. also Gilio da Fabriano, *Degli Errori de' Pittori* (1564), ed. Paola Barocchi, *Trattati d'Arte del Cinquecento*, 3 vols. (Bari, 1961), 2:81.

14. Cf. Lucas Cranach's engraving of Frederick the Wise venerating Saint Bartholomew, 1508–9, Hollstein 4 and F. Lippmann, *Lucas Cranach* (Berlin, 1895), pl. 57; the saint's flayed skin is here held by an angel. Images of Saint Bartholomew holding his skin with face displayed include the Hans Baldung Grien drawing of 1504 in Basel (fig. 15), presumably a preparatory study for the woodcut published in the *Hortulus animae* (Strassburg, 1511), fol. 1 8v; reprod. in Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, *Hans Baldung Grien* (Karlsruhe, 1959), p. 325; see cat. no. 101 for the Hamburg drawing. Another example is a Dürer School woodcut of 1518, Geisberg 794. In the Cranach type, the head in the skin is shown from the back, but unmistakably with the same curls that cover the head of the saint. Thus in Cranach's woodcut dated ca. 1510–15, Geisberg 573 (fig. 14) and a

copy thereafter by Hans Weiditz, Geisberg 1549. See also an unusual early example—the mid-fourteenth-century oak relief on the choir stall in St. Bartholomew, Frankfurt; reprod. in Schnütgen-Museum, *Die Parler und der Schöne Stil*, 3 vols. (Cologne, 1978), 3:241, 243. For the Wittenberg relic and Cranach's woodcuts for the 1509 *Wittenberger Heiligtumsbuch* (fig. 16), see Dieter Koeplin and Tilman Falk, *Lukas Cranach*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1974), 1: nos. 95–97, and 2:489. A few isolated and excentric examples of earlier Saint Bartholomews with the skin are cited in Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien: Iconographie des Saints*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1958), 1:182; and L. Price Amerson, Jr., "Marco d'Agrate's San Bartolomeo: an introduction to some problems," in *Il Duomo di Milano*, ed. Maria L. Gatti, 2 vols. (Milan, 1969), 1:189–93. The first Italian Renaissance painting to follow the Northern mode—the saint holding a skin with a face replicating his own—is Garofalo's *Adoration of the Magi with St. Bartholomew*, dated 1549, in the Ferrara Pinacoteca; reprod. in A. Neppi's *Il Garofalo* (Milan, 1959), pl. 45.

15. The anonymous diatribe of 1549 denounces a copy of Michelangelo's Saint Peter's *Pietà* which had just been placed in the Florentine church of Sto. Spirito: "They say that it derives from that inventor of obscenities, Michelangelo Buonarroti, who is concerned only with art, not with piety. All the modern painters and sculptors, pursuing Lutheran whims, now paint and carve nothing for our holy churches but figures that undermine faith and devotion"; first published in Giovanni Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'Artisti*, 3 vols. (Florence, 1840), 2:500. The "Lutheran" element in Michelangelo's work was less a matter of indecency or faulty content than the presumption to interpret doctrine according to private caprice. The equation of artistic license with theological heresy survives into the mid-seventeenth century. To a prelate who deplored Borromini's flouting of the rules of design, Bernini assented with the remark, "It is better to be a bad Catholic than a good heretic" (Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie dei Professori del disegno* [1681], 5 vols. [Florence, 1847], 5:666).

16. The Michelangelo portrait in the lower left of Venusti's copy (fig. 18) is too small to register in the reproduction. The author referred to in the sentence following is Carlo Angeleri, "L'Autoritratto di Michelangiolo nel 'Giudizio Universale': lo videro i contemporanei?" in *IV Centenario del "Giudizio Universale"*, pp. 241–42.

17. "Perche vi è mille heresie, massime della pelle di San Bartholomeo senza barba; e lo scorticato ha il barbone; il che monstra, che quella pelle non sia la sua etc." The letter, one of several to Vasari from Miniato Pitti, was first published in Karl Frey's *Il Carteggio di Giorgio Vasari* (Munich, 1923), pp. 148–49. Pitti's letter provides the basis for Angeleri's inconclusive polemic in the article cited above, n. 16; which includes further biographical data on this interesting character (pp. 233, 236 n.3, 235 n.3, and 237).

18. After the mid-sixteenth century, observers cease to register the disparity between the martyr and his flayed skin. Molanus in 1570 finds the motif as such objectionable, never doubting that the saint was represented "cutem suam manu gestantem" (see n. 13, above). According to John Addington Symonds, "S. Bartholomew flourishes his flaying-knife and dripping skin with a glare of menace" (*The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, 2 vols. [London, 1893], 2:61), while Mrs. Jameson sees the Apostle with "his own skin hanging over his arm" (*Sacred and Legendary Art* [1848], 2 vols. [Boston, n.d.], 1:252). Similarly, Ludwig Pastor has the saint "holding the implement of his martyrdom, the knife, in his right hand and in the left his skin as it had been flayed" (*The History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages*, 3d ed., 38 vols. [London, 1950], 12:622). Nineteenth-century visitors fresh from America followed suit. To one, the saint appears to be "holding . . . in his left hand the skin of which he was bereft" (William Torrey Harris, "'The Last Judgment' as Painted by Michel Angelo," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 3 [1869]: 81). Another writes: "By a strange grotesquerie which appears again and again in the picture, Angelo has put the figure of St. Bartholomew in the foreground, holding forth his empty skin to the view of the world. Such audacity of imagination is without parallel in the history of art" (Mary Wakeman Botsford, "Michael Angelo and the Sistine Chapel," *The Manhattan* 1 [1883]: 172).

19. See Chapon's exceedingly rare and perfectly insignificant *Le Jugement dernier de Michel-Ange* (Paris, 1892).

20. Ernst Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1901, 1905), 2:537.

21. Frey, *Carteggio*, p. 149. Note that the proposed regrowth of beard in the interval between death and Last Judgment not only leaves the saint's baldness uncured (a point raised in Gilio's *Errori*, ed. Barocchi, p. 80), but that it imputes a faulty theology to the artist. Before the general Resurrection, the saints in heaven are not as yet rejoined with their bodies—the bodily assumptions of certain chosen, such as Enoch, Elijah, and the Madonna being exceptions.

22. See Rudolf Wittkower, "Ein Selbstporträt Michelangelos im Jüngsten Gericht," *Kunstchronik und Kunstmarkt* 35 (1925–26): 366–67. The phrase "sensational discovery"—a surprising lapse into strong emotion—occurs in the La Cava entry in Steinmann and Wittkower's *Michelangelo Bibliographie 1510–1926* (Leipzig, 1927), no. 1109; with further literature.

23. See Angeleri, "L'Autoritratto de Michelangiolo," p. 232 n.2. A further argument adduced by Angeleri is even more infelicitous (p. 245). He argues that since contemporaries had no trouble recognizing the papal Master of Ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena, in the figure of Minos in the fresco's lower right corner, it seems improbable that they would have missed the artist's self-portrait. My article, "A Corner of the *Last Judgment*" (*Daedalus* [Spring 1980]), demonstrates that Vasari's identification of Biagio with Minos was an egregious blunder.

24. Corrado Ricci in *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 2 June 1925.

25. Cf. Calosso, "Ritratti nel 'Giudizio Universale,'" pp. 49–50: "Corrado Ricci ha avuto a sua volta un'intuizione felicissima, trovando nel S. Bartolomeo una stretta somiglianza con Pietro Aretino"; and Diego Angeli, "Il volto di Michelangelo scoperto nel 'Giudizio' insieme con quello del suo avversario Aretino nel supplizio di S. Bartolomeo," in *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 28 May 1925.

26. Tolnay, *The Final Period*, p. 45. Tolnay was anticipated by Romain Rolland, *Michel-Ange* (Paris, 1905), who imagined Saint Bartholomew raising his knife "avec une telle ferocité, qu'il semble l'écorcheur plutôt que l'écorché." The passage was quoted approvingly ("come ha detto bene Romain Rolland") by Carlo Grigioni, "La nudità del 'Giudizio Universale' di Michelangelo," *Il Trebbio*, Mensile della Romagna, Forlì, 2 (1942): 77. This provincial monthly is near *introvabile* even in Rome, and I am grateful to my former student and present friend, Jack Freiberg, for his tenacity in tracking it down.

27. Hoffmann (*Das Jüngste Gericht*, p. 20) reads "die unverkennbar symbolische Bedeutung des Selbstbildnisses" in these words from Curt Bauer: "Er wollte sich der Nachwelt als den von diesen Zeitgenossen lebendig Geschundenen darstellen; eine ungeheure Anklage, mit der sich der grösste Genius der Renaissance, Gerechtigkeit heischend, an die späteren Geschlechter wandte." So also Calosso ("Ritratti nel 'Giudizio Universale,'" p. 50): "L'autoritratto di Michelangiolo e il ritratto dell'Aretino così riconosciuti giovane, nel loro insieme di tormentatore e di tormentato, a gettar luce sopra un doloroso capitolo della biografia dell'artista, e, per riflesso, sui caratteri della sua espressione." Similarly, a recent American author: "Michelangelo expressed his feelings about the ordeal of art by painting a distorted self-portrait on the flayed skin held by St. Bartholomew. . . . Made miserable by the difficulty—both physical and emotional—of painting the Sistine ceiling, Michelangelo considered himself martyred by art" (Barbara Rose, "Self-Portraiture: Theme with a Thousand Faces," *Art in America* 63 [January-February 1975]: 71).

28. Still un-Christian, but of deeper intuition, is Edgar Wind's interpretation of the flayed skin, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, rev. ed. (New York, 1968), pp. 187–88. Though Wind recognizes in Michelangelo's later years "the growth of a more narrow and contracted piety," he derives the symbol of the self-portrait from the Dionysian ritual of flaying which, he believes, appears eroticized in Michelangelo's love poems. The mortal skin is "to be shed by the lover and offered to the beloved as a trophy of passion, sacrifice, and transformation, a token of renewal through death." Wind rediscovers this symbolism—in "an ostensibly Christian form"—in the *Last Judgment*, where "the Marsyas-like portrait is a prayer for redemption, that through the agony of death the ugliness of the

outward man might be thrown off and the inward man resurrected pure, having shed the *morta spoglia*." Finally, Wind, like Eugenio Battisti ("Michelangelo o dell'ambiguità iconografica," *Festschrift Luitpold Dussler*, ed. J. A. Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth et al. [Berlin, 1972], p. 220) senses a possible relevance in Dante's invocation of Apollo in the first canto of the *Paradiso*, 13–21: "Enter my breast, I pray you, and there breathe as high a strain as conquered Marsyas that time you drew his body from its sheath" (John Ciardi's translation of the lines: "O buono Apollo . . . Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue / sì come quando Marsia traesti / della vagina delle membra sue").

29. *Life Magazine*, 6 December 1949, p. 45. So also Redig de Campos speaks of the Apostle's own skin, "dove il Buonarroti ha nascosto un singolare autoritratto . . . in caricatura tragica della sua 'infinita miseria'" (*Il Giudizio Universale di Michelangelo* [Rome, 1964], p. 39). Tolnay sees the matter correctly: "It is the artist's empty skin which the saint holds in his hand" (*The Final Period*, p. 44).

30. Cf. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 12, chap. 17: "[Christ's] side, as he hung lifeless upon the Cross, was pierced with a spear, and there flowed from it blood and water, and these we know to be the Sacraments by which the Church is built up."

31. The sonnet is published in Steinberg, "A Corner of the *Last Judgment*" (see n. 23, above).

32. A portion of the pervading diagonal, from the Christ down to the figure falling from the bow of Charon's barque, was described by Tolnay (*The Final Period*, p. 44). But Tolnay's observation was marred by an intolerable misreading. Though he saw clearly that the thrust of Christ's action targets the artist's self-portrait, he did not question the received notion which would have the divine Judge deliver a malediction. He therefore concluded that Christ was depicted in the act of cursing the artist, whose further abasements, Tolnay thought, should be plotted sequentially in the figures of "Shameface" and the man falling hellward out of the barque. The fresco's central incident, then, would be the artist's damnation. Tolnay cannot have asked himself what it means to impute certainty of damnation to a believing Christian of the sixteenth century. For the effects of such certainty, we have the well-documented case of Francesco Spiera, a lawyer of Cittadella, who in 1547 became a *cause célèbre* because he believed himself to be rejected by Christ. As "Christ's enemy," he could not bring himself to pray, fell into a wasting condition, which the divines and physicians of Padua diagnosed as Judas Iscariot's sin of despair, refused food and sleep, and told his ineffectual consolers shortly before his death: "I have been swept away. I feel within myself the sentence of eternal damnation. I am cursed forever among the reprobate . . ." (quoted in Anne Jacobson Schutte's *Pier Paolo Vergerio* [Geneva, 1977], pp. 239–40). Spiera, whose mind remained lucid until the end, declared that he felt like a man in chains, unable to move. In such a condition, a man cannot tie his shoelaces, let alone paint a fresco. Or did Tolnay imagine that Michelangelo was not wholly in earnest?—like an eighteenth-century wag protesting, "Well, I'll be damned!" (Tolnay's earlier publication of his hypothesis was rightly rejected with irony by Angeleri, "L'Autoritratto di Michelangiolo," p. 233 n.3. Unfortunately, Angeleri tossed out the observed diagonal along with its faulty interpretation.) The diagonal in its purely formal capacity had been previously noted by Wölfflin, who saw it as one in a complementary pair. For the counter-diagonal in the *Last Judgment*, see Steinberg, "A Corner of the *Last Judgment*," cited above, n. 23.

33. See Steinberg, "Merciful Heresy," p. 61 n.13. Cf. José C. Nieto (*Juan de Valdes and the Origins of the Spanish and Italian Reformation* [Geneva, 1970], p. 299 n.26): "The movement of [Valdes'] thought is toward the annihilation of those who do not belong to Christ"; and: "Only they who are incorporated into Christ are certain of their resurrection, grounding it upon the resurrection of Christ" (p. 300 n.30). Of Valdes' last years, Celio Secondo Curione writes (1550) that "he was, to the best of his ability, assiduously intent upon real mortification; in which, when death found him, he was perfectly mortified, to be afterwards perfectly vivified at the resurrection of the just" (quoted in Philip McNair's *Peter Martyr in Italy* [Oxford, 1967], p. 25, from Curione's preface to the first ed. of Valdes' *Hundred and Ten Considerations*).

34. Job 19:25–26. The relevance of the text was independently recognized by Thom

Grizzard, then a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. The enormous difficulties presented by the (probably corrupt) Hebrew text are not relevant here. I have quoted the wording of the Douay Bible which follows the Vulgate. An alternative text was adduced in a recent article by Marcia B. Hall, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*: Resurrection of the Body and Predestination," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 87 n.5. The author quotes from Tertullian's argument for bodily resurrection: "And lest you should think the apostle [Paul] had anything else in mind, taking forethought for himself and toiling for you to understand that the statement referred to the flesh: when he says 'this perishable nature' and 'this mortal nature' he holds his own skin as he speaks" ("cutem ipsam tenens dicit"; *De resurrectione carnis*, 51, 9 ff., Evans translation [London, 1960]). "This verbal image," writes Hall, "seems strikingly like Michelangelo's visual one. . . ." But, in fact, Tertullian's is not an "image" at all. He is saying that Saint Paul, to emphasize that he had his very body in mind when he spoke of "this perishable" and "this mortal," must have been touching, pointing to, or holding onto, his own skin. That he would be holding a *flayed* skin is not indicated, nor by any stretch can Michelangelo's image be made to illustrate the Tertullian passage. Following is the translation of the Tertullian passage as given in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York, 1918), 3:584-85: "Moreover, that you may not suppose the apostle to have any other meaning, in his care to teach you, and that you may understand him seriously to apply his statement to the flesh, when he says '*this corruptible*' and '*this mortal*' [italics original], he utters the words while touching the surface of his own body." The editors add: "Rufinus says that in the church of Aquileia they touched their bodies when they recited the clause of the creed which they rendered 'the resurrection of *this* body.'"

35. Crashaw's English translation of the *Dies Irae* begins with a self-apostrophe, "Hears't thou, my soul, . . ." an interpolation censured by a modern editor: "Crashaw by introducing himself in the first line has robbed the opening of its universality and much of its dignity and so set a tone of intimacy out of keeping with the intent of the Latin" (*The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, ed. George Walton Williams [New York, 1970], p. 186).

36. When we apply the rule of axial symmetry to Michelangelo's group compositions, we bear in mind that it obeys the same principle of animation which also modifies the axially of his individual figures. Michelangelo's symmetries, whether simple or multiple, are disturbed, as though momentarily stirred by internal movement. In the *Last Judgment*, the centralized elements in the upper half shift to the left, in the lower half, to the right. For a detailed description of such modified symmetry in the *Conversion of Saint Paul* in the Cappella Paolina, cf. Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings*, p. 34.

37. It would be worth making a study of Vasari's way with ambiguity, especially in confrontation with Michelangelo. The study would show that ambiguity is vitally present in Michelangelo's work; and that Vasari resists it wherever found. He evades the issue even where it cries out for acknowledgement, as in the case of Michelangelo's (lost) bronze statue of Julius II (for the portal of S. Petronio, Bologna, commissioned by the pope in 1507), whose vigorous action was so equivocal that the pope, inspecting the statue, "asked if the raised right hand was giving a blessing or a curse." Wherever Michelangelo's works exhibit an ambiguity, Vasari comes down with assurance on one side or the other. Of the Christ in the Saint Peter's *Pietà* he declares that "no better corpse was ever made," even though this corpse displays engorged surface veins and hands engaged in gesture, being both dead and alive in accordance with Christ's dual nature. The Virgin in the *Doni Tondo*, Vasari writes, is "offering the Child to Joseph." Yet Michelangelo has defined the offering of the Child in a functional ambiguity—a parental gesture precisely suspended in reciprocal giving (see L. Steinberg, "Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*," *Vogue* [December 1974]: 139). Just so, describing the Christ of the *Last Judgment*, Vasari writes that "Christ is seated," whereas the figure has been seen—with good reason—as seated, or standing, or springing up, or as striding forward. "Such differences of opinion proceed less from carelessness in the viewer than from a given ambiguity which the viewer resists. . . . Michelangelo cast the Christ of the Second Coming in a posture which cannot be matched in our vocabulary or analogized to normal physical habits" (Steinberg, "Merciful Heresy," p. 50). Vasari understands allegory



FIG. 31.—Gaspare Ruina after Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, woodcut, detail.

of the kind that is susceptible to direct verbal translation. But he is programmatically silent about Michelangelo's irreducible ambiguities—lacking the conceptual equipment and the will to articulate this special dimension of Michelangelo's power.

38. The interaction of the *Last Judgment* fresco with the physical space of the Sistine Chapel will be discussed in a separate study now in progress.

39. Among Michelangelo's spiritual self-portraits I would include the drowned son in the *Deluge* on the Sistine Ceiling; the vanquished dotard in the *Victory* at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence; the hooded mourner in the Florence *Pietà* (fig. 8). Charles Seymour has found that even the *David* represents a personal "search for identity," the subtitle of his monograph, *Michelangelo's David* (Pittsburgh, 1967).

40. Vasari writes of the *Creation of Adam*: "dove ha figurato Dio portato da un gruppo di angeli ignudi e di tenera età, i quali par che sostenghino non solo una figura ma tutto il peso del mondo, apparente tale mediante la venerabilissima maestà di quello, e la maniera del moto, nel quale con un braccio cigne alcuni putti quasi che egli si sostenga. . . ." It was J. P. Richter who, in 1875, first corrected Vasari's misreading: "... keineswegs ein jugendlicher Knabe, . . . sondern unverkennbar—ein Weib. . . . Und dies Weib is Niemand anders, als Eva" ("Die Schöpfung des Menschen von Michelangelo in der sixtinischen Kapelle," *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 10 [1875]: 171). The alternating acceptance and rejection of Richter's insight during the past hundred years cannot be detailed here. But it is instructive to compare two artists' copies. In the first, an early sixteenth-century woodcut by Gaspare Ruina (fig. 31), the femininity of the figure under God's arm is emphasized by the breasts, as if to clarify what the artist takes to be Michelangelo's meaning. In the other, a drawing by Watteau (fig. 32), the corresponding figure—raised knee omitted—becomes one of a group of rococo putti. Insofar as these copies are divergent interpretations of the original, only one of them can be correct.



FIG. 32.—Antoine Watteau after Michelangelo, detail of *The Creation of Adam*, drawing. Collection Julius Held.

41. The identification of the great putto as the Second Adam again goes back to Richter, *ibid.* A typical expression of the opposition is found in Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, 2:330. He reads the child as a putto about to burst into tears because he has not found a good viewing position: "Und nichts anderes ist auch das kräftige Putto, dessen Schulter Jehovahs Linke berührt und das man sogar als den Sohn der Maria bezeichnet hat. Es unterscheidet sich von seinen Brüdern nur dadurch, dass es nicht auf den Menschen blickt und höchst unzufrieden und dem Weinen nahe ist, wahrscheinlich weil es noch keinen bequemen Aussichtspunkt finden konnte."

42. To skeptics, whose fear of over-interpretation is such that they would rather leave things unnoticed than see them explained, I propose the exercise of performing Eve's manual gesture. Only he who has tried to repeat it, and felt the impossible strain the gesture imposes on one's resistant joints, is in a position to judge whether the interpretation here offered is compelling or arbitrary.

43. L. Steinberg, "Eve's Idle Hand," *Art Journal* 35 (1975-76): 130-35.

44. For a summary of the critical fortunes of the *Manchester Madonna* and a bibliography, see Cecil Gould, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth-Century Italian Schools* (London, 1962), pp. 95-97. See also the excellent technical analysis by the restorer of the London National Gallery, Helmut Ruhemann, with results of a microchemical examination appended by Joyce Plesters: "The Technique of Painting in a 'Madonna' attributed to Michelangelo," *Burlington Magazine* 106 (1964): 546-54. Ruhemann dates the work to the early 1490s and finds it "exceptionally significant in that it was painted at a turning-point in the history of painting technique when tempera was being given up in favour of oil." With all his caution, Ruhemann clearly favors the Michelangelo attribution. Cecil Gould is in agreement, dissociating the work from the group of pictures assembled around the "Master of the Manchester Madonna" because the former seems superior in "the quality of

design and execution." It is superior also in quality of thought, but this is a criterion which many will regard as unprofessional, not objective enough for the science of connoisseurship.

45. Inspired ambiguity governs the Virgin's posture in the *Manchester Madonna*. At first sight, she appears erect, as becomes her regal and iconic character. Her withdrawal to left grows apparent only in the relation of the upright torso to the trailing left foot in its red leather slipper. But if she were pulling away from the boy's upward climb, the impulses of Mother and Child would be in conflict, which is, iconographically speaking, improbable. On the other hand, if the Virgin withdraws as the Child steps down, their respective motions express mutual consent.

46. The verticals, given in the uprightness of the six serried figures, are crossed by a weft of subtle persistence. Notice, at two-thirds the height of the picture, moving from left to right, a shelf traced from one angelic elbow to the sash of the scroll-reading angel on the opposite side.

47. Michelangelo's use of the forthright glance is sparing and, I suspect, always significant. In the *Manchester Madonna*, only the "messenger" engages us by eye contact. In the early *Battle of Cascina* cartoon, the herald glancing forth from the picture is exhorting a patriotic Florentine citizenry. In the histories of the Sistine Ceiling, the visual contact with the beholder is reserved for the promised Christ in the *Creation of Adam*; in the *Last Judgment*, for the figure of Death; in the Pauline Chapel, for the stern summons of Saint Peter. Among the allegorical Times of Day in the Medici Chapel, *Il Giorno* gazes at us. The single exception, if it is an exception, is the Sistine Ceiling *ignudo*, left above Daniel.

48. Cf. Leonardo: "the point may be compared with an instant in time and the line may be likened to the length of a certain quantity of time. And just as points are the beginning and end of the line, so instants are the end and the beginning of any given space of time" (Cod. Arundel, fol. 190v; J. P. Richter, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* [New York, 1970], no. 916).

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