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Michaelangelo

The Reluctant Painter

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Michaelangelo Buonarroti was born in 1475 near Florence, Italy, at the height of the Italian Renaissance. At the age of thirteen, after being apprenticed to a famous painter for a year, he decided to devote himself to becoming a sculptor. His talents were immediately recognized by the famous political leader and art patron, Lorenzo de' Medici, who took the young student into his home — a palace where the top intellectuals of the day gathered to share important ideas. These ideas inspired Michelangelo's art and his lifelong interest in writing poetry. At the age of twenty-two, Michelangelo was called to Rome where he sculpted the famous *Pieta* of St. Peter's Cathedral, the statue showing Jesus cradled in his mother Mary's lap. Two years later, Michelangelo was called back to Florence to sculpt the eighteen-foot-tall sculpture of the Biblical hero *David* as a symbol of the city's independence. Owing to the fame he achieved from these two statues, Pope Julius II called Michelangelo back to Rome in 1505 to sculpt his tomb. No sooner had Michelangelo begun to work on this massive project, which was never finished, than the Pope commanded him to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was thirty-two years old when he began painting the ceiling. After completing it, he sculpted many well-known statues and served as the architect on several important buildings. Ironically, he returned thirty years later to create the "Last Judgment" fresco painting on the one remaining Chapel wall. After the "Last Judgment" was completed, Michelangelo ended his career by designing the spectacular dome of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Yet, it would always be the paintings he did on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel — the one work that caused him the greatest difficulty — that would, in the eyes of the world, be his greatest achievement.

MICHELANGELO STATED repeatedly that he was a sculptor, not a painter. Yet, his best known work, indeed his masterpiece is the series of paintings he created on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome (Color

Plate 5). Although this was the work for which he was proclaimed a genius in his own lifetime, it represented the one job he was most reluctant to do. Michelangelo accepted the commission to complete the paintings solely

because Pope Julius II insisted that he do so. As many people feel today, Michelangelo needed the money and the good will of his prime employer. To continue to refuse the Pope could mean a ruined professional reputation as well as a serious loss of income. So, very reluctantly, Michelangelo agreed to decorate the ceiling of the Pope's private chapel. Immediately, he found the working conditions very difficult, if not impossible. He was exhausted by the physical stress of standing up all day on a scaffolding an arm's length from the ceiling. In addition, he had to paint, a medium of artistic expression in which he felt technically incompetent. However, as work progressed and he became immersed in the project, his skill steadily developed. This increasing competence gave Michelangelo the confidence to conceive a detailed plan for the ceiling's completion that excited him. In turn, he became more and more inspired in his work, totally overcoming his initial reluctance. When the paintings on the Chapel ceiling were finally unveiled after four years of backbreaking labor, Michelangelo had created an astonishing work that met his personal goal of "[giving] no other appearance than that of perfection." His journey from reluctance to inspiration to perfection is an important example of how a worker can find inner satisfaction from difficult toil.

In his journal of official transactions, Michelangelo recorded May 10, 1508, as the date on which he accepted the popes initial payment for the painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. This acceptance had come after several months of pressure from Julius II. Indeed, the Pope had first asked him to decorate the ceiling in 1506 and Michelangelo had refused. In the intervening years, Julius II had searched for another artist. However, the architect Bramante, who resided

in Rome and had the favor of the Pope, had repeatedly recommended Michelangelo. Bramante wanted to be the architect who built the new St. Peter's Cathedral. He was jealous of Michelangelo and feared that Michelangelo might win the commission for St. Peter's. Since Bramante was convinced that the Chapel ceiling decoration was not a job that Michelangelo could complete successfully, he recommended that Michelangelo be the one to do it. Michelangelo would then be discredited in the eyes of the Pope and the rest of Rome, thus ensuring Bramante future commissions that might otherwise go to Michelangelo. It is likely that Michelangelo suspected Bramante's manipulations.

Further, it had been twenty years since Michelangelo had initially learned and then briefly practiced the fresco painting method. This is a permanent painting technique in which pigment and water are brushed directly into fresh, wet plaster (*fresco* means "fresh" in Italian). The pigment binds into the wet plaster as it dries, becoming a part of the wall itself. Michelangelo disliked fresco painting and felt that he knew little about it. This reluctance was reinforced by the problems of working above his head on the curved surface of the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Another negative factor was that Bramante's relative, the famous painter Raphael, had just been commissioned to complete a set of large frescoes in Julius's library nearby. Michelangelo was certain that Raphael's creations would be perfectly executed and make his frescoes look all the more flawed. Given all these considerations, Michelangelo tried in every way possible to refuse Pope Julius. Finally, the Pope grew angry at his reluctance and demanded that Michelangelo begin at once. The troubled Michelangelo complied.

Throughout his life, Michelangelo wrote poetry, particularly when he was troubled. The sonnet that appears below was written to Pope Julius II on just such a disquieting occasion as described above. It is not known precisely when Michelangelo wrote this poem, but his plea to the Pope not to listen to those who spread lies and question his loyalty could easily apply to Michelangelo's concerns about Bramante.

To Pope Julius II

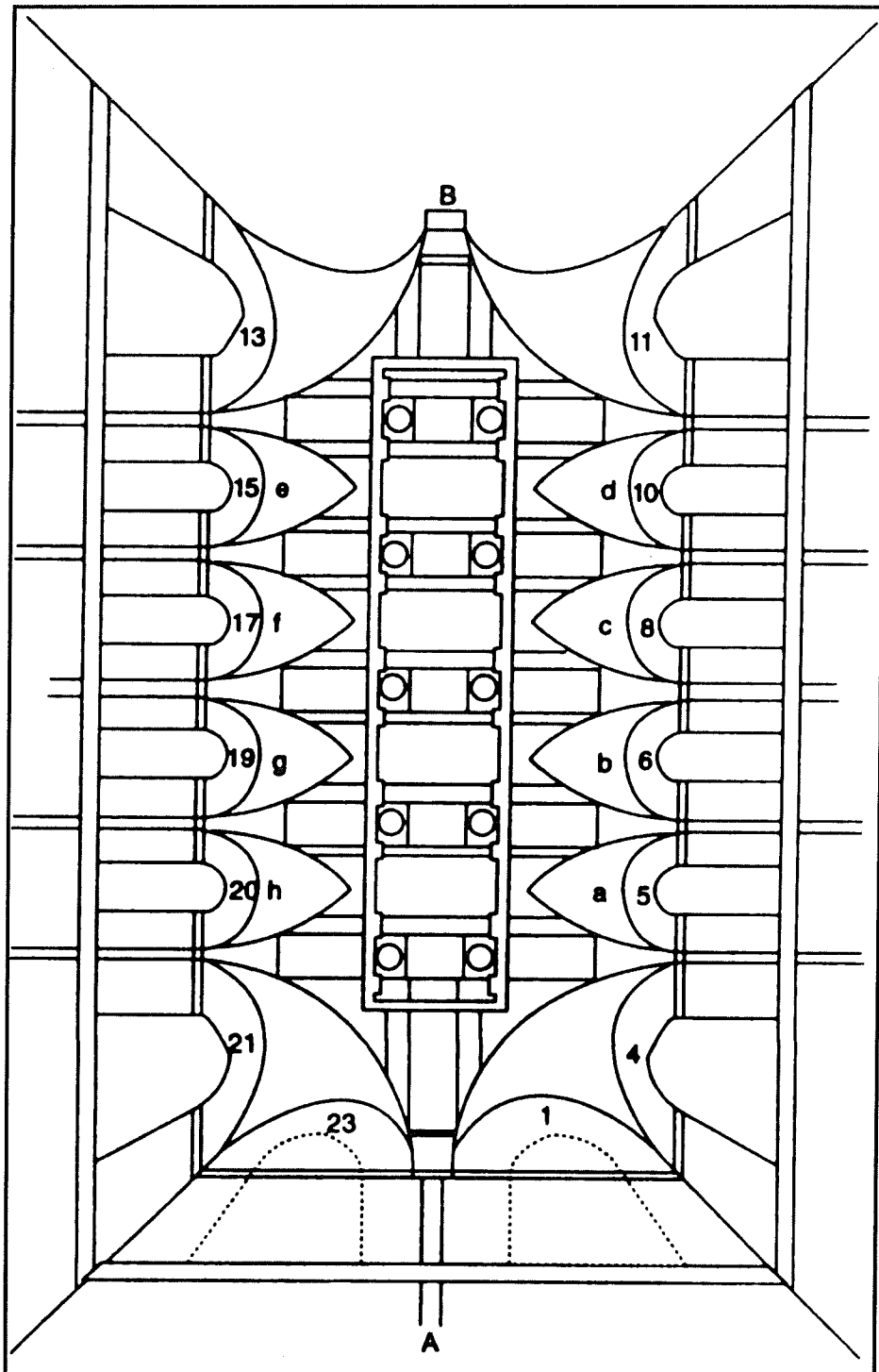
My Lord! If ever ancient
 saw spake sooth,
 hear this which saith:
 Who can, doth never will.
 Lo! thou hast lent
 thine ear to fables still,
 rewarding those who hate
 the name of truth.

I am thy drudge and have
 been from my youth—
 thine, like the rays
 which the sun's circle fill;
 yet of my dear time's waste
 thou think'st no ill:
 the more I toil,
 the less I move thy ruth.

Once 'twas my hope
 to raise me by thy height;
 but 'tis the balance and the
 powerful sword
 of justice, not false Echo,
 that we need.

Heaven, as it seems,
 plants virtue in despite
 here on the earth,
 if this be our regard —
 to seek for fruit on trees
 too dry to breed.

As soon as Michelangelo began painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he encountered difficulties. Although the Chapel was a place of private worship for the Pope and



**COMPOSITION PLAN OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL
CEILING, 1508-1512.**

Numbered areas indicate lunettes. Lettered areas indicate spandrels. A indicates the entrance and B indicates the fresco of the last judgment.

other high-ranking Church officials, it was also used as a fortress for defense purposes. Essentially, it is one large rectangular room with three-foot-thick brick walls, high windows, and a narrow entrance. The room measures 132 feet by 44 feet with the ceiling arching 68 feet, approximately seven stories above the floor. The ceiling and side wall areas to be painted by Michelangelo encompass some 700 square yards of surface. Michelangelo was overwhelmed by the physical demands of working in the Chapel and immediately complained to the Pope about the scaffolding that Bramante had erected for him. The ropes were secured by holes drilled in the ceiling and Michelangelo could envision no way in which the holes could be filled once the scaffold came down. The Pope quickly agreed that Bramante's scaffolding must come down and Michelangelo could erect his own.

Once his own scaffolding was up, Michelangelo began working on the "Flood" scene from Genesis (Color Plate 6). Unsure of his fresco painting technique, he put too much water in the lime base coat and the surface of the painting became coated with mold. The figures he painted were barely visible and Michelangelo was compelled to scrape off the paint and begin the panel again. He used this disaster as an excuse to be dismissed from the project; the Pope refused.

Michelangelo then brought in five painter-assistants from Florence to help compensate for his lack of experience. However, Michelangelo was a perfectionist and was as critical of their work as of his own. He quickly fired them all, destroyed the paintings they had completed, and determined to paint the whole Chapel by himself.

Michelangelo was young and energetic, and worked hard to master

the technical difficulties of fresco painting. He usually worked eight-hour days, standing up on a scaffold some five to six stories above the floor, with his head up and arm raised high to paint. The physical strain so affected his eyes that for months afterwards he could read mail only by holding the letters above his head. In the midst of his toil, Michelangelo described his stressful working conditions in the following sonnet.

While Painting the Sistine Chapel Ceiling

In this hard toil I've
 such a goiter grown,
 Like cats that water
 drink in Lombardy,
 (Or wheresoever else
 the place may be)
 That chin and belly meet
 perforce in one.
 My beard doth point to heaven,
 my scalp its place
 Upon my shoulder finds;
 my chest, you'll say,
 A harpy's is, my
 paintbrush all the day
 Doth drop a rich mosaic on my face.
 My loins have entered
 my paunch within,
 My nether end my
 balance doth supply,
 My feet unseen move to
 and fro in vain.

In front to utmost length
 is stretched my skin
 And wrinkled up in
 folds behind, while I
 Am bent as bowmen
 bend a bow in Spain.
 No longer true or sane,
 The judgment now doth
 from the mind proceed,
 for 'till ill shooting through a
 twisted reed.

Then thou, my picture dead,
 Defend it, Giovan, and my
 honor—why?
 The place is wrong, and no painter I.

Over the course of the first two years, Michelangelo's plan for the ceiling paintings began working out so well that he became increasingly inspired and sure of himself. Michelangelo's plan called for dividing the ceiling and upper side walls to be painted into three distinct areas that were enclosed and overlapped by the perfect forms of the circle, the square (or rectangle), and the triangle. First, in the nine central panels that run down the middle of the ceiling, Michelangelo painted the story of creation in reverse order, using a contemporary philosophic idea that life should be a journey from the slavery of the body to the liberation of the soul in God. These panels, of which the "Flood" is one, recount episodes from Genesis. The figures painted in these panels are the smallest and the most tightly painted of all those on the ceiling.

The second area, appearing on the side of the central ceiling zone, is composed of twelve seated prophets and sibyls enclosed in rectangular areas. Just below the prophets appear eight Biblical ancestors of Christ enclosed in triangular areas, and in four corner triangles are episodes showing the deeds of heroic Biblical men and women. By the time Michelangelo started working on the second area, his fresco painting skills were fully developed. Consequently, his confidence began to soar. He became inspired as he saw that his plan was not only being realized, but that he could continuously improve upon it. At first, he had been particularly concerned about the problems involved in making his painted figures appear convincingly three-dimensional on the curve of the vaulted ceiling. His

strong experience in using drawings to plan his sculptures led him to imagine his painted figures as sculpted forms. As such, he was able to portray them in a realistic three-dimensional manner on the two dimensional surface. As he continued to develop his skills to the expert level, his confidence grew also. This surge in confidence was reflected by the physical growth of his painted figures—their size increased dramatically! In particular, the prophets and sibyls grew so large that he was forced to lower their seats to make room for them (Color Plate 7). These figures are painted more loosely and naturally than those in the central panels and, consequently, show the greatest dynamism of those painted on the ceiling. Indeed, it is these figures that have been the most widely copied and reproduced over the centuries. Michelangelo's confidence in his plan and his growing experience led him to create and execute the third area in a fast yet masterful manner.

The third area comprises that of the lunettes, the fourteen semi-circular panels that surround the top part of the windows on the section of the Chapel walls closest to the ceiling. Each lunette panel occupies about six by eleven feet of wall space and contains two to three figures representing the sixteen families who are the ancestors of Christ. Incredibly, Michelangelo completed each panel in only three working days. He did not use preparatory drawings as he had in the other areas, but drew the image for the panel directly onto the wall plaster. His skill as a fresco painter had developed to the point that he could paint expertly without needing to follow a drawing. Each of the lunette panels is comprised of two main sections on either side of the top part of the window and an inscription plaque above the middle top of the window that identifies the fam-

ily depicted. Michelangelo completed the inscription plaque first, in one day, and then spent two days painting the figures. The figures are beautifully and naturally executed in the looser manner of the prophets and sibyls. Michelangelo had gained such mastery with the fresco painting technique that he was able to achieve brilliant color effects by using pure (unblended, unmixed) colors that he applied in thin, liquid layers. Consequently, the large patches of pure tones give these figures a sculptural quality of depth and presence. By this time, Michelangelo was also experimenting with color. The background is a lilac (light purple) color that compliments the figures in a dramatic and pleasing manner. Over time, Michelangelo became so energized by his creation and so skilled at fresco painting that he was able to complete a section of the ceiling in 100 days that was almost as big as the part it had previously taken him three years to complete!

After four years of exhausting toil, the ceiling was completed and opened for public viewing October 13, 1512. The response was overwhelmingly favorable. Indeed, the contemporary art critic Vasari said that the ceiling paintings were “a lamp for our art which casts abroad luster enough to illuminate the world.” During these four years, Michelangelo had worked almost totally alone on the 700 square yards of surface, painting more than 300 figures! Since the original plan had called for only twelve figures, the Pope, who was close to seventy years old, could not understand why Michelangelo was taking so long and constantly badgered him to complete the project. Indeed, towards the end of the project, the Pope had grown so insistent that he even threatened to have Michelangelo thrown from the scaffolding so the ceiling could be un-

veiled. Michelangelo rushed to complete the last area, the lunettes, leaving brush hairs, still visible today, stuck into the plaster. Angry with the Pope's pestering, Michelangelo removed the scaffolding and had the ceiling uncovered sooner than he had intended. Michelangelo, ever the perfectionist, would probably have continued for four more years on the project if Julius II had let him!

All of Rome viewed the frescoes as a masterpiece. One contemporary viewer wrote of the ceiling that “it was such as to make everyone speechless with astonishment.” For the close to five hundred years since its unveiling, the ceiling has awed and inspired all who have seen it. It is one of the few art works that patrons have committed to restoring at any price. A massive and costly renovation project undertaken by the Japanese corporation Nippon in 1980 was completed in 1992. This project restored the frescoes to their original colors after centuries of dirt and smoke had obscured Michelangelo's brilliant masterpiece. Every year, millions of people continue to go to see the ceiling as they have ever since Michelangelo was forced to unveil it.

Michelangelo's reluctance to do the project and the many difficulties he encountered in its execution may have made him even more determined to create a work of unrivaled excellence. Once he became skilled at the fresco painting technique, his imagination soared. Is it possible that the more difficult the task and the more an individual is challenged, the harder he or she works to master that task? Does each of us need an overwhelming assignment to guide our skills to a high level and excel beyond our greatest expectations? By all accounts, even the perfectionist Michelangelo was pleased with the ceiling. His difficult toil had led to such inner satisfaction that some

thirty years later, in his mid-sixties and embittered by the barbaric sack of Rome, he readily agreed to return to the Sistine Chapel and create the "Last Judgment" fresco on its last, unpainted wall.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. How did Michelangelo's attitudes towards the painting of the ceiling change from the Pope's initial request to the unveiling?
2. Why was Michelangelo challenged by the fresco painting technique? How did he deal with the challenge?

TALK ABOUT IT

3. How does the level of skill a person possesses relate to his or her attitude about doing a job?
4. Why do you think it was a Japanese corporation, and not a Western one, that funded the massive restoration project of the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes?

WRITE ABOUT IT

5. Name a large artistic project underway today. What skills and attitudes must the creators possess for it to be a success?
6. Have you ever felt reluctant to begin a big job? Did your reluctance change once the job was underway? Why or why not?

READ MORE ABOUT IT

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