

Michelangelo's Art Through Michelangelo's Eyes

PART TWO of THREE

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The objective of this three-part article is to demonstrate that accurate visual perception, replicating what the artist saw, must precede any verbal interpretation of great art. Michelangelo's work was chosen for this demonstration because he is a high priest of Western painting and sculpture. Though widely studied, very little of his underlying art, like that of any great master, has ever been seen because sight is a construction of the mind. Just as a hidden figure in an optical illusion cannot be seen by those with no expectation of its being there, so the illusion of *exterior* reality hides Michelangelo's depictions of *inner* reality . This situation has been very fortunate for Michelangelo's legacy, as he must have calculated. Had the revelations here been generally known in the Renaissance, or even later, all Michelangelo's work in the chapel, now a World Heritage site, might have been erased.

We will begin by considering Michelangelo's view of Biblical narrative, the ostensible subject of his images, and then turn to the four remaining representations of God on the ceiling. Newly-discovered aspects of the *Last Judgment* will also be discussed.

Inner Life: An Age-Old Perspective

The Sistine ceiling was painted thirty years earlier than *The Last Judgment*. Nevertheless his figures of God creating the world represent the same theological approach as the figure of Christ inside the mind of Dante. No doubt, scholars of Western esotericism might be able to identify slight differences between the two but they will not be major. What is major is the gap between what the painting portrays and what the ordinary viewer sees. Nevertheless, the shift in perception required to view the work as Michelangelo saw it is simple; ordinary art lovers have even shared aspects of this experience in print but their reports have always been ignored or dismissed by art scholars. While most observers suppose that Michelangelo's Biblical scenes are illustrations of Biblical narrative, surrounded by pagan characters, what he really painted was his own imagination, his interior life, with all the figures, pagan and Christian, representing various aspects of himself.¹

Consider the figure of Jonah, who has already been shown in Part I to adopt the pose of a painter at work. Why? The Bible does not suggest he was a painter. The difference lies in the gap between an exoteric and esoteric interpretation of the Bible. The literal story of Jonah is that of a man being swallowed by a whale and regurgitated three days later. It is normally interpreted either as a battle of good versus evil or, on a symbolic level, as an Old Testament prefiguration of Christ's resurrection. In contrast, someone with an esoteric mind like Michelangelo's, reads the story quite differently on an even deeper level. To them the story represents the soul's journey to perfection. In being devoured by the whale Jonah becomes at one with the Universe and God. He is lost to exterior reality for three days in the darkness of the whale's interior, in the bosom of the Godhead, only to reappear like Christ

reborn. The Church authorities, whose power and influence has always rested on a view of God as *external*, were outraged at the idea that everyone is an emanation of God, able to unite with God. Priests might then become expendable. Nevertheless, many people have read the entire Bible, not just the story of Jonah, as an instruction manual for the soul. Not everyone, it is said, has a mind capable of this type of interpretation. For many Christians the superficial meaning is enough, providing moral and ethical guidance. They tend to believe in the historical truth of the Virgin birth, the Resurrection and other stories. The more spiritually advanced avoid such arguments because for them the Bible's literal truth is of less consequence. Its inner, allegorical truth is what matters. This more profound approach to divinity has a long and continuous tradition within Western culture. It is little known because the established Churches generally ignore it while generations of historians, influenced by the Enlightenment and modern science, have long passed it by as well. Fortunately, in recent decades, Gnosticism, spiritual alchemy and theosophy, to name a few of the major strands of Western esotericism, have become the focus of an active field of scholarly research. They are still not part of the academic mainstream but progress is being made. Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, both flourishing during Michelangelo's lifetime, are now better understood. I leave it to scholars in those fields to determine which particular strand of thought was closest to Michelangelo's. Just remember, though, that this view of the Bible as an internal journey of the soul would not have been then, nor is today, entirely unusual among the literate elite. Moreover Church corruption in Michelangelo's day forced many people to *search* for a more personal and spiritual alternative. With that in mind, let us return to the multiple representations of God on the Sistine ceiling. They are all internal.

Art in Heaven

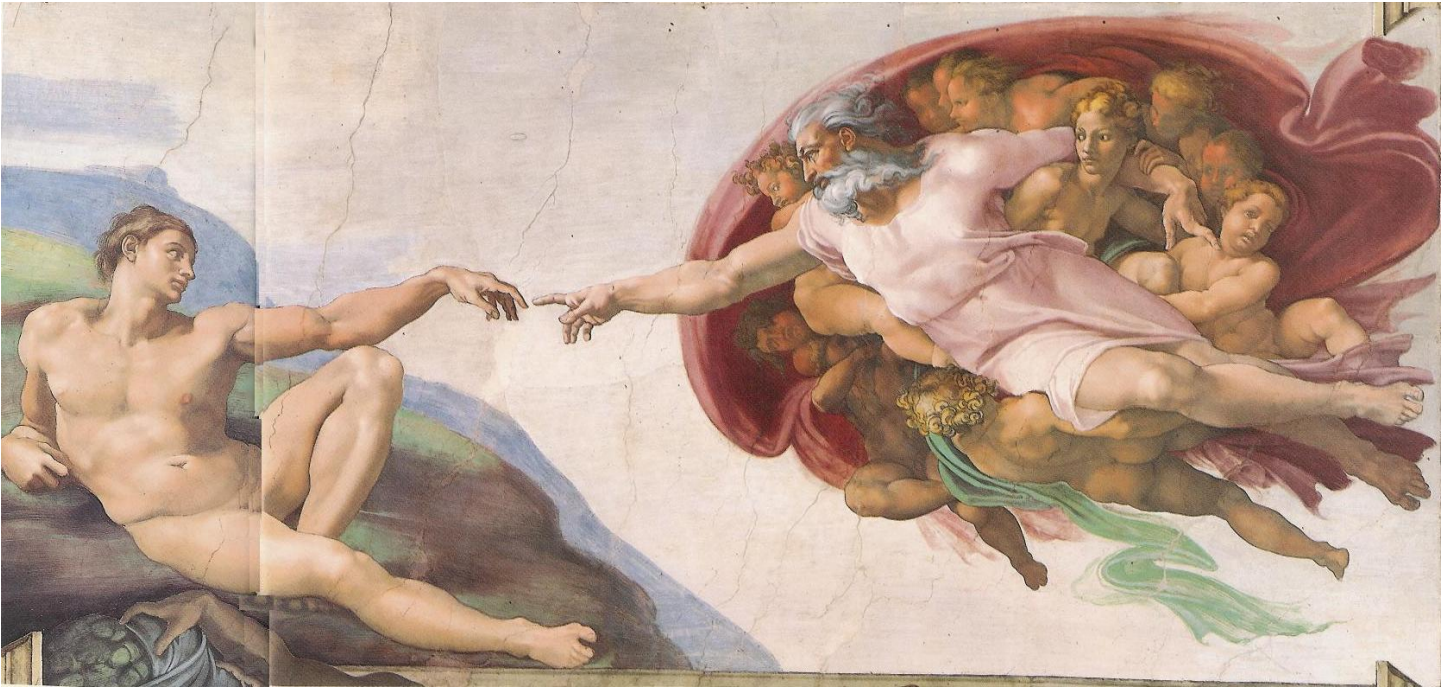


Fig. 1 Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*

One scholar has already described the world's most famous representation of God, that in *The Creation of Adam*, as a self-representation of Michelangelo. After all the artist did paint Adam just as God sculpted the first man (fig. 1).² Besides, Adam's muscular physique resembles many other nudes by Michelangelo, including *David*. There is a visual clue here too. Michelangelo's God, in an expansion of the pictorial tradition, physically exerts Himself, stretching to create Adam like a painter. God, who in full figure had always been depicted enthroned or immobile, had no need to stretch his arm because, in past art, He *thought* and it was done. God here is so physical that, minus the beard, he resembles an Olympic athlete. Now consider that painters can spend all day with their arm outstretched towards their work. To those in tune with a great master's thought-pattern, and that includes many hundreds of artists over the centuries, God's stretch is an unmistakable sign of self-representation. It is a movement they are used to. The notion of God as *deus artifex* is moreover a

universal idea. Genesis even suggests, someone once noted, that God in creating the Universe resembled a Mesopotamian craftsman surveying his wares. Each evening during Creation, the Bible recounts, God checked the quality of his day's work: "...and saw that it was good."

In Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* the artist is represented by both God the Creator *and* Adam the Perfect Everyman. He is both model and artist. The symmetry of the composition and the similar forms convey the mirror-meaning. While the cortex-shape of God's drapery symbolizes the intellect required to create great art, the emphasis on His touch signals the artist's craft. Again a similar theme was expressed in the scene of Jonah (see Part I).



Fig. 2 Michelangelo, *God Separating the Light from the Darkness*

In a third panel, *God Separating the Light from the Darkness*, it has been noted that God seems to emerge out of formless chaos, creating Himself (fig. 2).³ Contemporaries even suspected that God was the artist painting the ceiling with His two hands. Given that God's body language relates to Jonah's⁴, whose pose was revealed in the first section to be a painter's at work, this interpretation now seems secure.

Another writer has further remarked that the swirl of pink paint out of which God emerges is a metaphoric womb.⁵

Could the fabric's shape be based on observation of a real

womb?

While the meaning behind His cloak remains elusive, there is no doubt that Michelangelo, like Dürer before him, is representing himself as God. His friend Vasari suggested as much in describing the

scene in the Chapel. He recorded how the painter spent day after day, high up on the scaffolding in the Sistine Chapel, imperiously refusing to let the Pope see the ceiling from down below. That in itself confirms Vasari's interpretation because who else but 'God' orders the Pope around from *on high*?

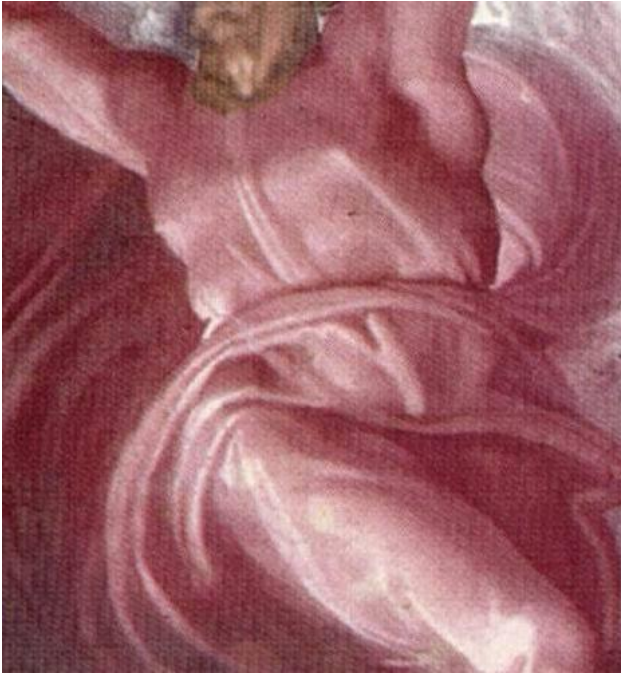


Fig. 3 Michelangelo, *God Separating the Light from the Darkness* (detail)



Fig. 4 Michelangelo, *God Creating the Sun and Moon* (detail)

Before moving on please note that God in this panel carries prominent marks of both genders. He has both protruding, feminine breasts ⁶ and a form in his cloak suggesting an erection (fig. 3). Both are logically present because Michelangelo, as we have seen, believed the Godhead to be both *fertile* and *androgynous*. Both features appear again in *God Creating the Sun and Moon* (fig. 4) and if that phallic shape beneath His cloak in both panels is not an erection, what is it? ⁷



Fig. 5 Michelangelo, *God Creating the Sun and Moon* (detail)

God Creating the Sun and Moon is another panel in which hidden elements improve the pictorial logic though work remains to be done (fig. 5). Here God looks similar to the prophet Jeremiah, already acknowledged by scholars as a Michelangelo look-alike; moreover, He vigorously *stretches* his arms and has a bi-forked beard like Michelangelo's, a signature-attribute like the artist's broken nose. His cloak, like that in other panels shaped into anatomical parts, appears to form the approximate shape of an eye's brow, thus making reference to the bodily organ that transmits the light of the sun and moon.⁸ If so, God is inside the artist's mind or brain, *behind* the eye's orbit stretching his arms to His two cosmic eyes, the Sun and Moon. This description must remain uncertain while the shape of the fabric remains unidentified.

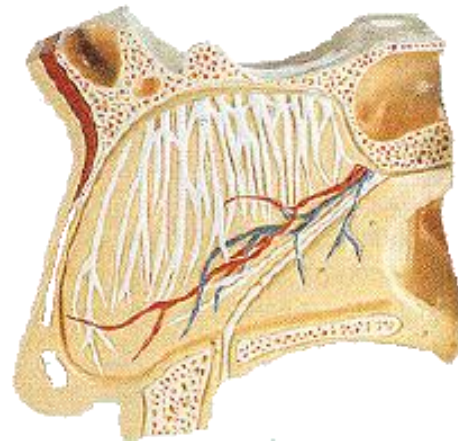


Fig. 6 Michelangelo, *God Creating the Plants* with anatomical diagram of a nose

The last figure of God on the ceiling includes a rare glimpse of His backside (fig. 6). At first sight He is stretching *downwards* to create plants. However, if one imagines that God's figure is not part of the painting but is *separate from it*, a visual illusion occurs. No writer has noted that God's figure could then appear to be Michelangelo's own, sitting on an invisible plank or stool, stretching *upwards* to paint the ceiling. Even the two tresses of gray hair flying off to the right again suggest a reference to the artist's bi-forked beard.

God's cloak, on the other hand, represents a large nose. As you can see by comparing Michelangelo's image to the anatomical diagram of a nose, God's torso forms the bone at the bridge while folds in the cloak to his right echo the various channels and bone formations behind the nose. His left foot suggests the bone behind the upper lip while his toes may even reflect the roots of teeth. The flap of cloth hanging over his left calf is out of place but appears to be a tongue. In combining nose and tongue in one "diagram" Michelangelo refers to smell and taste: the two senses most relevant to plants.

Faces in Fingers and Noses on Thighs

Although Michelangelo had no interest in exact likeness, never accepted portrait commissions and freely scrambled facial characteristics, academics have long thought that he portrayed anatomy with complete accuracy, using knowledge gained through dissections. He may have exaggerated physiques for expressive purposes but the basic anatomy was thought to be correct. A few scholars, though, have rightly cautioned that dissections teach little about drawing a live model. In any event there is no need to assign a specific reason for his interest in dead bodies because, like Leonardo, Michelangelo had a voracious appetite for knowledge. He would have been interested in the organs and structure of the human body regardless. His knowledge of anatomy, though, is a different story because despite scholarly praise for the anatomical accuracy of his nude figures there is a great deal of inaccuracy. Michelangelo was clearly capable of drawing accurately so his incorrect representations of the muscular structure demand explanation.

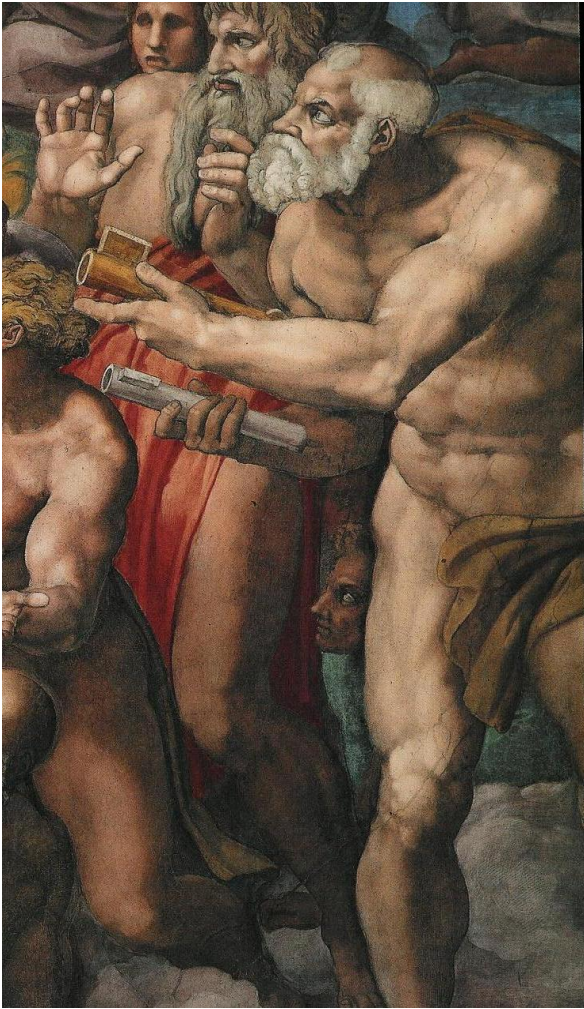


Fig. 7 St. Peter (detail of *The Last Judgment*)

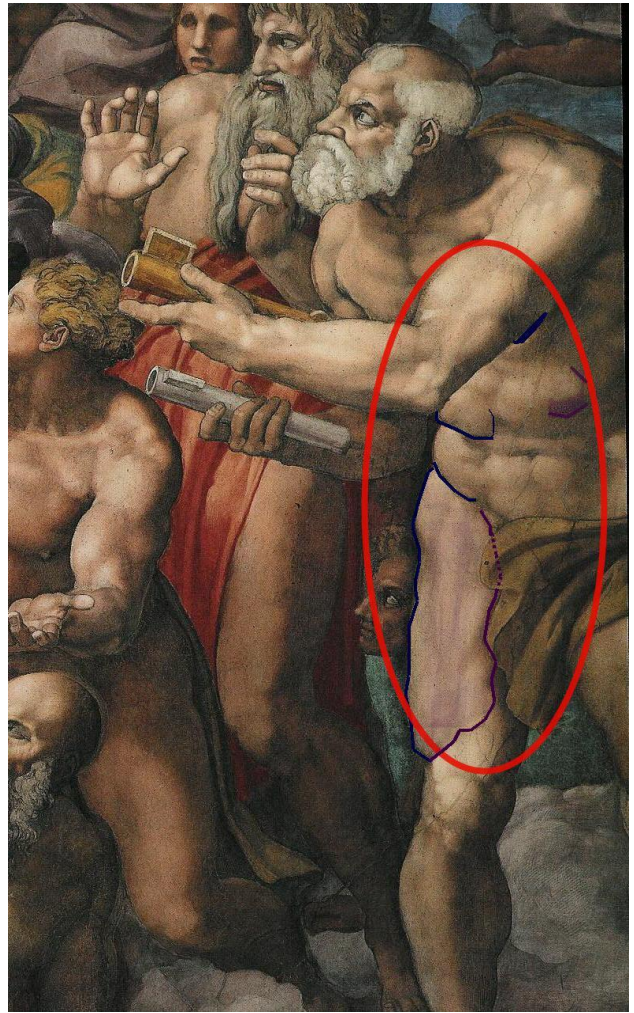


Fig. 8 Diagram of fig. 7

Only a handful of possible “self-portraits” by Michelangelo are currently known, the most famous being the face on the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew and it is not really a true likeness. Another more realistic self-portrait is here revealed *in the torso of St. Peter* (figs. 7-8). Michelangelo looks to the left, towards Christ, in profile. His eye and the top part of his nose are hidden by Peter’s arm (outlined within red oval), another reference to the unity between eye and arm (read, *hand*); his beard ripples with muscles down Peter’s thigh (lightly shaded). To the right of his nose is his characteristically high cheekbone, here a jutting rib (dark shading).



Fig. 9 Charon (detail of *The Last Judgment*)

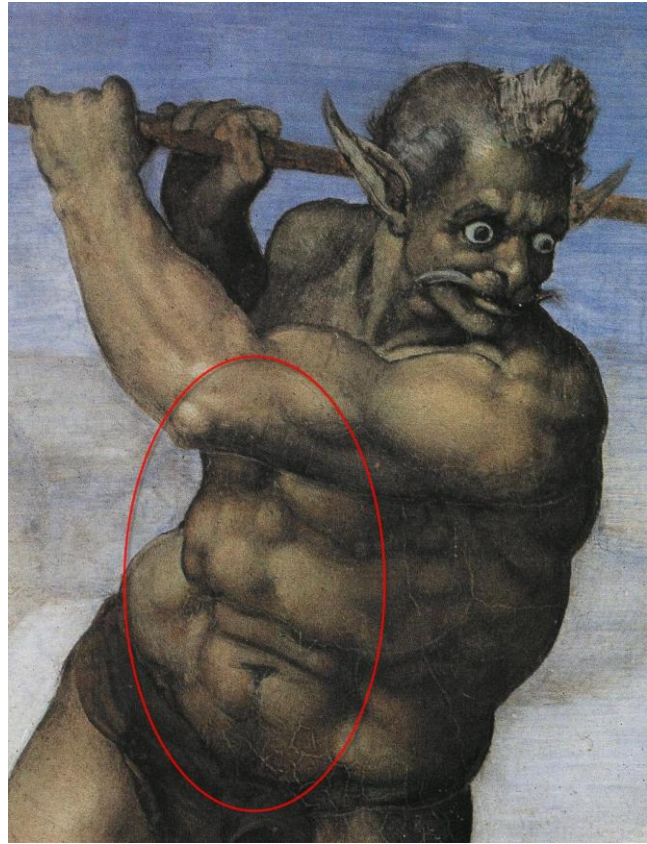


Fig. 10 Diagram of fig. 9

Lower down Charon, the boatman from Greek mythology who reappeared in Dante's *Inferno*, has an older man's face in profile *in his ribs*, again facing to the left (figs. 9-10). The nose is the most prominent part, the one eye merely indicated by the shadow of a muscle. He looks toothless. Given that Charon ferries dead souls, perhaps this is a projected self-portrait of what Michelangelo might look like on meeting his Maker. As noted earlier, the artist's recurrent appearance within the painting demonstrates that the entire scene is inside his mind where all the imaginary figures take on aspects of himself. These are not separate individuals but internal representations of Michelangelo.



Fig. 12 Michelangelo, Detail of *Last Judgment* (above)
 Fig. 13 Diagram of fig. 12 (below)



Fig. 11 Vasari, *Portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (detail)

Both those faces were whole; in this example a nose substitutes for the personality, a visual synecdoche. One of the most memorable figures of the whole wall, the scared man at center, has an eye and ski-jump nose *in a shoulder muscle and collar-bone* (figs. 12-13). It is the nose of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who died early in Michelangelo's career and whose mask we saw in the "memory-box" (fig. 11). There is no evidence outside the testimony of two hagiographers that Michelangelo ever met Lorenzo. We do know that he wove a story in old age around how Lorenzo first recognized his talent as a sculptor but its truth has been doubted.⁹ Regardless, the great man held mythic power in Michelangelo's imagination throughout his life. Furthermore, the artist with the broken nose favored noses as a mark of identity, as we will see in the next drawing as well.



Fig. 15 Michelangelo, *Study of a Leg*



Fig. 14 Diagram of the figure in fig. 14



Fig. 16 Fra Bartolomeo, *Fra Savonarola*

Here there is a long nose on a buttock. It points towards the figure's thigh while an eye is merely indicated by shading (figs. 14-15). An unaccompanied nose suggests an owner so famous that he can be identified by his proboscis alone. Here it must be Girolamo Savonarola, the fiery preacher, who had been burnt as a heretic when the artist was twenty-four (fig. 16). Michelangelo had faithfully followed his sermons as a teenager and maintained a fondness for him all his life. In old age he claimed to still hear him speaking.¹⁰

These two noses, borrowed from Florence's "philosopher-king" and mystic prophet, are ideal representatives of a great artist's mind and Michelangelo was fortunate to have lived in a society with two such appropriate personalities, both with remarkable noses. However, on another level, the use of noses as a synecdoche for its owner's portrait also indicates Michelangelo's well-known affinity for Ovid, a poet to whom Dante was also greatly indebted. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* influenced many artists and may have inspired Michelangelo to make the truer metamorphoses shown here. In any event, Ovid's last name was *Nose* (in Latin), as in *Publius Ovidius Naso*, and it was the name he generally used for himself in his poetry. Lacking any extant portrait of the poet from antiquity, later artists had long portrayed him with an extended proboscis, thanks to his name alone.



Fig. 17 Michelangelo, *Prophet Jeremiah*

Of all the figures with a figure within, my personal favorite is the Prophet Jeremiah on the ceiling (fig. 17). His tormented and sorrowful appearance has long been compared to Michelangelo's. Two actual, though vague, self-portraits lie unseen in his beard.

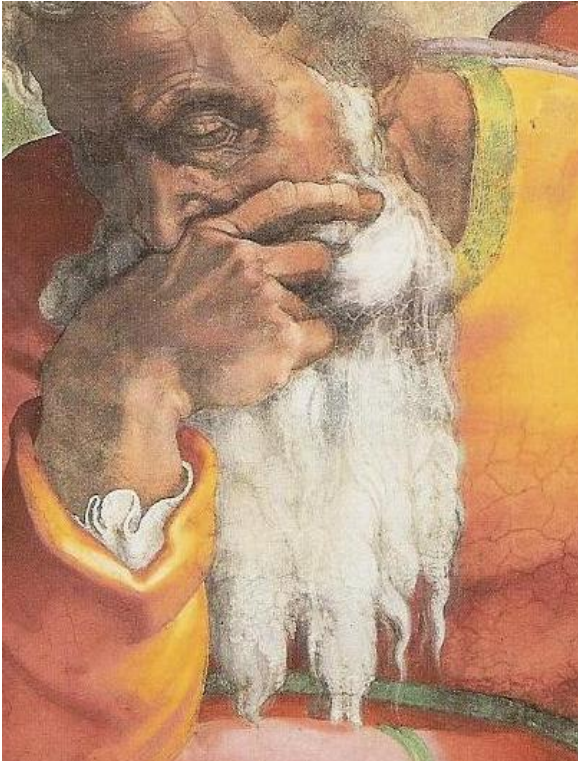


Fig. 18 Detail of Michelangelo's *Jeremiah*

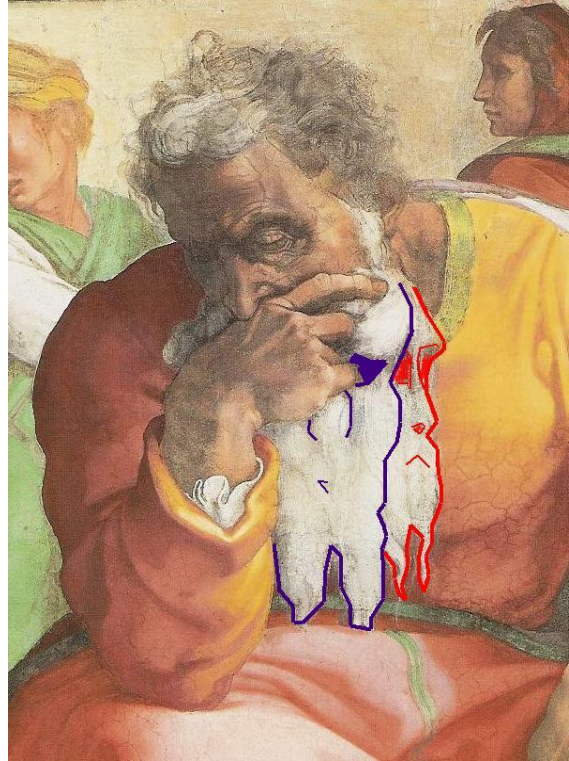


Fig. 19 Diagram of fig. 18

Facing outwards in the largest portion of the beard is the main one (blue in diagram), his eye in shade just to the right of his little finger, the other eye is hidden by the palm of his hand, yet another suggestion of how intellect (eye) and craft (hand) are combined in a great artist (figs. 18-19). His broken nose swells in white on either side beneath, a slight shaded hollow for the mouth and below that Michelangelo's characteristically bi-forked beard.....represented by a forked beard. At the far right edge of the beard is yet another self-portrait (red in diagram) facing in profile to the right. The downward lines of his mouth, the crushed bridge of his nose and again the two-pronged beard are the most distinct features. The discovery of *two* self-portraits side-by-side is typical of the artist as Edith Balas has recently explained in *Michelangelo's Double Self-Portraits*. Yet there is much more to discover in Jeremiah's figure.



Fig. 20 Detail of Michelangelo's *Jeremiah*



Fig. 21 Detail of Vasari's *Lorenzo*, rotated (fig. 11)

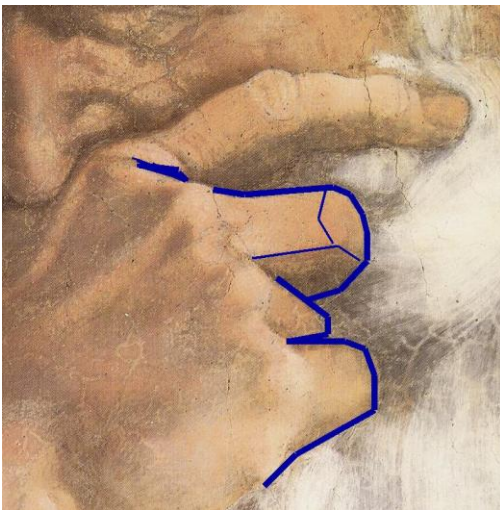


Fig. 22, 23 Diagrams of Jeremiah's finger and beard

Fig. 24 Michelangelo, Jeremiah's Name on Sistine Ceiling



The clenched part of Jeremiah's hand yields a further surprise, an unprecedented caricature of Lorenzo comparable to Lorenzo's portrait by Vasari (figs. 20-22). The jutting chin, the acutely receding upper lip and the ski-jump nose with its blunt tip have all been caught in Jeremiah's fingers. A pointing, active digit emerges from the angled crease which represents his eye. This again refers to the unity of eye and hand. The other end of his finger, the nail-end, even pokes the eye of another face in his beard (green in fig. 23), somewhat reminiscent of the putti behind the prophets, all of whom have similarly shaped faces like that, also, of the blond, bare-breasted woman holding up his name-plate (fig. 24). The significance of these putti will be described in Part III.

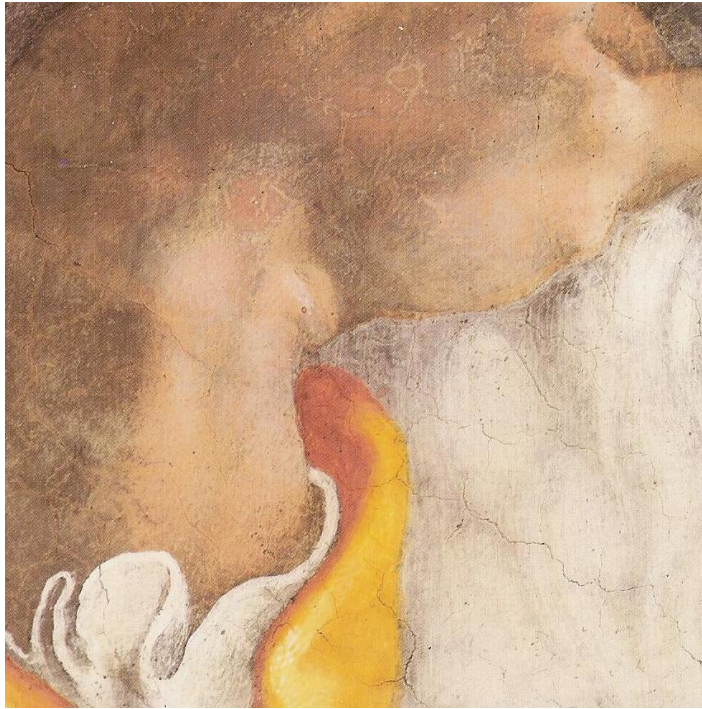


Fig. 25 Detail of Jeremiah's hand and wrist

Look more closely, though, at Jeremiah's hand and you will see a breast with a nipple protruding from it (fig. 25). The knuckle is misplaced in order to give it the appearance of a nipple. Should there be any doubt, there is a phallic-shaped highlight pointing upwards on his wrist. Once again incorrect anatomy is used; Jeremiah has a double wrist-joint to create the two-sided penile head. This close combination of gender symbols is yet another example of the ever-present representation of androgyny in his work.

The Private Parts of the Vatican



Fig. 26 Michelangelo, Study for one of the dead rising in the *Last Judgment*

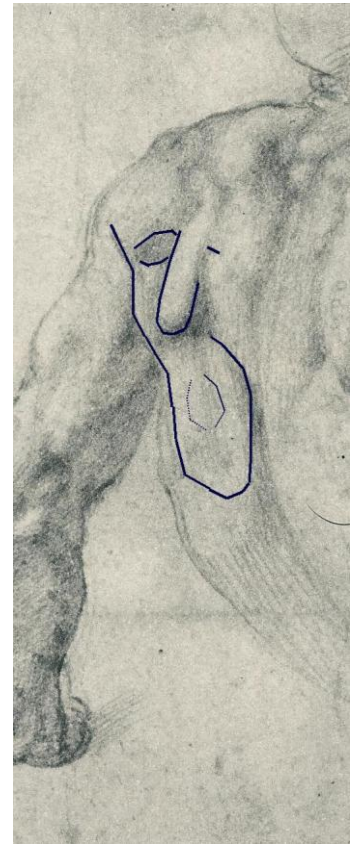


Fig. 27 Diagrammatic detail of fig. 26

The last figure in this section appears both in an initial sketch and the finished *Judgment*. Supposedly representing one of the dead rising, he has remained just to the left of the Sistine altar for five hundred years, one of the most important altars in Christendom. In the drawing an unrelated face screams on the man's left shoulder (figs. 26-27). The lower half of his 'face' is faint but is a long drawn, open mouth. In the actual mural, however, the suggestion of a mouth disappears as his bulging shoulder muscles no longer make sense as a face.



Fig. 28 Michelangelo, *Last Judgment* (detail)



Fig. 29 Detail of fig. 28 upside down

Turn the image around , though, and the nose in the drawing reappears as a phallus with two rather large testicles (figs. 28-29). It was not the only time that Michelangelo turned an image around to hide another figure so it was easy to recognize.¹¹ Besides, both *Bacchus* and *David* have swollen testicles too. Having mastered the left shoulder, I knew by the inaccurate anatomy that there must be something on the right shoulder too. Moreover, I again knew exactly what it was because I had come to understand how Michelangelo worked. Yet the realization was a strange experience because while I knew what it was *and* that I was looking at it, I had no idea *what it looked like*. Nor, I subsequently learnt, was there a word for it when Michelangelo painted the wall because it was supposedly not discovered until twenty-five years later. No-one in 1534 is meant to have even known about it. Yet here it is, accurately depicted as I discovered later, close to the altar in the Sistine Chapel. The object in question is a *clitoris*, the feminine homologue of a penis (figs. 30-31). Michelangelo no doubt discovered it in dissecting a corpse. I have no idea how many readers know what a clitoris looks like. I didn't. To my surprise – and some of my early readers' – it resembles a phallus with a sharp bend in its length where it attaches to the pelvis. Like the male phallus on the left shoulder, it is upside down.

One of Michelangelo's biographers remarked that he had himself witnessed Michelangelo dissecting a corpse during which he "showed me many rare and recondite things."¹² A clitoris was probably one of them and Michelangelo surely thought, incorrectly, that it had fertile powers based on its phallic shape.

The portion Michelangelo depicted is inside the blue oval, and includes the penile head.



Fig. 30 Detail of fig. 29 upside down (the clitoris on his shoulder)

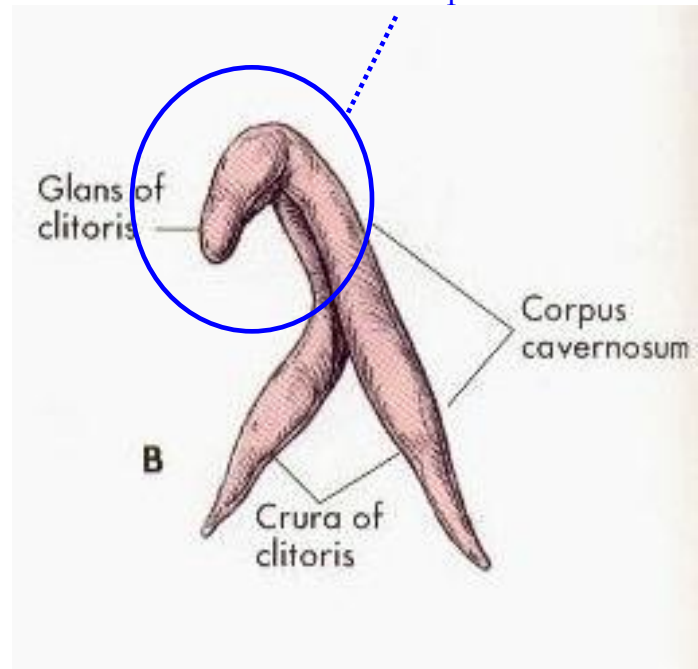


Fig. 31 Diagram of a clitoris

In the third and final part of this series we will look at some other works by Michelangelo, both early and late, to discover the surprising consistency of his underlying themes.

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- 1 Scholars often claim, often in a patronising tone, that the complex design of the Sistine ceiling must have been planned by theological advisers. The sub-text of their comments seems to suggest that no artist, lacking a formal education in the humanities, could have done something so complex and sophisticated.
- 2 Barolsky, 1994, pp. 140-1; Barolsky, 2003, pp. 44-8, 54.
- 3 De Tolnay, p. 40
- 4 Winner, p. 116
- 5 Ehrenzweig, pp. 206-11; Ehrenzweig also suggested that creative power is the sub-theme of the whole ceiling, though he recognized self-representation in *God Separating the Light from the Darkness* alone. He also suggested that Michelangelo's contemporary audience must have had a high tolerance for a heretical treatment of the Bible.
- 6 Partridge, p. 42
- 7 Leo Steinberg first demonstrated the astonishing frequency with which representations of Christ in the Renaissance include an erect phallus. However, though his writings on Michelangelo are extensive, he never, to my knowledge, noted these two prominent examples in Michelangelo's God.
- 8 I will demonstrate in a subsequent article how the Sun refers to an artist's observation of exterior reality while the Moon indicates insight and imagination.
- 9 Barolsky, pp. 102-3
- 10 Erlanger, pp. 47, 76
- 11 In two copies after one of Michelangelo's lost drawings a self-portrait is hidden in a mask upside down. See Paoletti, p. 434.
- 12 It is not the only time Michelangelo depicted a clitoris. There is a similar one, years earlier, on a right shoulder in a figure study for the *Battle of Cascina*, c.1504