

A Reflection and Analysis on the ‘Creation of Adam’ Sistine Chapel Fresco

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Abstract

One of the best-known images from the Sistine Chapel ceiling is Michelangelo’s ‘Creation of Adam’ in which God stretches out his finger to bestow Adam with life. This paper analyses Michelangelo’s work observing how deeply held religious convictions provide catalysis for theological reflection. Reflection on religious artwork assists the development of analytical skills and comprehension of the Christian faith. This is realized through the engagement of artistic creations within a theological and aesthetic framework. Accordingly, analysis enhances an appreciation for the role of art in the study of theology and the broader aspects of knowledge and learning, particularly the conduit between art and religion.

Introduction

Michelangelo is one of the greatest artists of all time whose name is synonymous with the word ‘masterpiece.’ The ‘Creation of Adam’ fresco on the Sistine Chapel ceiling is acknowledged as one of the world’s most famous art treasures.¹ The ‘Creation of Adam’ section of Michelangelo’s frescoes is the fourth in the series of panels depicting episodes from the *Book of Genesis*.² The fresco illustrates the Genesis Biblical story in which God the Father breathes life into the first man, Adam.

This article will argue that Michelangelo’s ‘Creation of Adam’ fresco ranks among his greatest works offering an ideal vehicle for reflection on theological and aesthetic principles. Moreover, that reflecting on works of art such as the ‘Creation of Adam’ fresco assists aesthetic analysis and theological thought. Consideration of Michelangelo’s artwork demonstrates how his works stem from deep religious convictions. Indeed, how

¹ C.C. Bambach, “Vasari’s Michelangelo,” *Apollo- the International Art Magazine*, Vol. 177(609) (2013):50-59.

² *The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition (U.S.A: Catholic Bible Press, 1993).1-48.

Michelangelo's frescos offer theological insights when mindful of the interrelated roles of Adam and the Father (Genesis 2:19, 21, 23; 3:8-9, 17).³

Accordingly, four aspects of Michelangelo's life will be dealt with here, namely: (1) a brief biography of Michelangelo, (2) a history of the Sistine Chapel, (3) a description of the 'Creation of Adam' fresco, and (4) a reflection on the fresco.

A Brief Biography of Michelangelo

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, commonly known as Michelangelo, was born on March 6, 1475 at Caprese, Tuscany (Italy). Michelangelo was a renowned Florentine sculptor, painter, architect, poet, and founder of the high Renaissance style and the most influential of late Renaissance artists.⁴ As an artist Michelangelo was the creator of works of magnificent transcendence that conveyed the fullness of the human condition. However, in circles where art prospered only with patronage, Michelangelo was trapped amid the differing powers and caprices of the Medici family in Florence and the Papacy in Rome. Distinct from many artists of his time, his brilliance was acknowledged, but at great cost to his personal life.⁵

Michelangelo's career spanned 70 years, over which time he was the pivotal character in Italian art. Michelangelo's lineage was from a poor yet aristocratic father claiming noble ancestry. This was a thorny issue for Michelangelo as his family's opposition to an artistic career stemmed from such pride of birth, and was accentuated by Michelangelo's claim on the status of painting and sculpture as ranking among the higher liberal arts.⁶

Michelangelo's father, despite his opposition to his son's artistic ambitions, apprenticed him to the painter Ghirlandaio in 1488.⁷ This association brought Michelangelo under the influence of Lorenzo de' Medici and progressive artistic-philosophic trends. However, privately, Michelangelo's works and texts revealed a deep, enduring Catholic piety and his art personified a notion and vision of human dignity and reliance on the Creator.⁸

³ *The Holy Bible*, NRSV Catholic Edition, 2-3.

⁴ Kleetus K. Varghese, *Michelangelo and the Human Dignity : An Anthropological Reading of the Sistine Frescoes* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corp., 2005), 31-35.

⁵ Enrica Crispino, *Michelangelo*, 1st ed., Artist's Life (Firenze: Giunti, 2001), 8-10.

⁶ Patrick J. Ryan, "The Right and the Left," *America*, Vol. 169 Issue 15 (11/13/1993): 23-23.

⁷ Richard Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross : The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47.

⁸ F. Hartt, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2nd edition (U.S.A.: Thomson Gale, 2003), 601-603.

Accordingly, Michelangelo was completely committed to art and religion, living frugally despite his fame. He was the subject of two detailed biographies in his lifetime, both by close associates (Vasari and Condivi). More is known about Michelangelo's personal qualities and career than any previous artist.⁹ Michelangelo was aware of his worth and his place in the world, despite his scornfulness of society and the trappings of success. Personally, he was affectionate and generous to his family and friends yet inclined to be distrustful and withdrawn harbouring a sharp temper and a sarcastic tongue. However, as Byrne and Houlden note: "With a celebrated artist like Michelangelo, it becomes clear that the very person of the artistic creator can at times embody and signify spiritual values transcending matters of mere personality."¹⁰

Furthermore, as Emison states relative to Vasari's view of Michelangelo's standing in history:

Michelangelo was sent by a merciful God, to be for us a spirit who, working alone, was able to demonstrate in every art and every profession the meaning of perfection in the art of design, how to give relief to the details in paintings by means of proper drawing, tracing, shading, and casting light, how to work with good judgement in sculpture, and how to make buildings comfortable and secure, healthy, cheerful, well proportioned, and richly adorned with various decorations in architecture. Moreover, he wanted to join to this spirit true moral philosophy and the gift of sweet poetry, so that the world would admire and prefer him for the wholly singular example of his life, his work, the holiness of his habits, and all his human undertakings, so that we would call him something divine [heavenly] rather than mortal.¹¹

Historically, Michelangelo is viewed as an archetype Renaissance character due to the extraordinary order and flexibility in the disciplines he undertook. Michelangelo, together with Leonardo da Vinci, is the best-documented artist of the 16th century and as noted by Harris, "Michelangelo remains the archetypal genius."¹² The most noteworthy of Michelangelo's art is considered to be his Sistine Chapel works in Rome. Specifically, scenes from Genesis and the 'Creation of Adam' on the Sistine Chapel ceiling together with The Last Judgment on the altar wall add testament to this claim of genius.

⁹ Giorgio Vasari, Julia Conaway Bondanella, and Peter E. Bondanella, *The Lives of the Artists*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 479.

¹⁰ J. L. Houlden and Peter Byrne, *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, Routledge Reference (London: Routledge, 1995), 327.

¹¹ Patricia A. Emison, *Creating the "Divine" Artist : From Dante to Michelangelo*, Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 3.

¹² Jonathan Harris, *Art History : The Key Concepts*, Routledge Key Guides (London: Routledge, 2006), 130.

A History of the Sistine Chapel

The Sistine Chapel ceiling forms part of the large Papal Chapel built within the Vatican by Pope Sixtus IV after which it is named.¹³ Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling, between 1508 and 1512 at the commission of Pope Julius II, and in doing so created one of the most renowned artworks of the High Renaissance.¹⁴ As Williamson points out, “The interior of St Peter’s, as we see it now, is the product of the 16th-century rebuilding programme, under Bramante and Michelangelo, which completely replaced the medieval basilica.”¹⁵ Relative to the ceiling and particularly the passion of Christ, Viladesau notes, “In the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1508–12) the passion of Christ is not depicted, but it is eluded to symbolically through Old Testament prefigurings.”¹⁶

Furthermore, the Murrays’ refer to this period in Michelangelo’s’ life by highlighting that:

The most outstanding painting of the first part of his life, from 1508 to 1512, is the vault of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. In it are set out in images of unforgettable imaginative power the history of the world from the Creation to the Sacrifice of Noah after the Flood, in a sequence of four large and five smaller panels, together with the vividly characterized figures of the Messiah.¹⁷

The appointment of Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel arose from the receipt of a letter from Pope Julius II. The letter revealed that the idea for finishing Sixtus IV’s Chapel had been proposed when Michelangelo was previously in Rome. Michelangelo’s response was negative for he doubted his ability to paint the Chapel as required. However, on May 10, 1508 Michelangelo contracted to paint the ceiling for 3,000 ducats and began work immediately.

Thereafter, Michelangelo worked on the ceiling daily over the following four years. It proved to be harrowing and taxing labour, as Michelangelo had to climb scaffolding daily

¹³ Richard McBrien, *The Pocket Guide to the Popes* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 245.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251

¹⁵ Beth Williamson, *Christian Art : A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 77.

¹⁶ Richard Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross : The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 233.

¹⁷ Peter Murray and Linda Murray, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 323.

and lay flat on his back 65 feet above the floor with paint dripping down on him.¹⁸ Emison affirms this when stating, “The same Michelangelo who described himself as grotesquely misshapen from painting the Sistine Ceiling.”¹⁹

The ceiling's various painted elements form part of a larger scheme of decoration within the Chapel exemplifying much of the doctrine of the Catholic Church. These include the large fresco of The Last Judgment on the sanctuary wall and the ‘Creation of Adam’ on the ceiling, together with wall paintings by other highly regarded painters of the late 15th century such as Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Perugino.²⁰ Central to the ceiling decor are nine scenes from the Book of Genesis of which the ‘Creation of Adam’ is the best known, having an iconic standing equalled only by Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa (See Figures: 3-4). As Varghese points out, “Every individual fresco in the ceiling is centred around nine central panels of which the ‘Creation of Adam’ is the central one.”²¹

Due to the many centuries since Michelangelo’s initiating this work restoration was necessary due to degradation. The restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes was one of the 20th century’s most momentous art renewals. Although the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel had been restored previously, the aforementioned 20th century restoration was achieved between the period of 1980 and 1994.²² This restoration was of particular significance due to the effect on art enthusiasts and historians. Colours and details were revealed for the first time in centuries. However, this extraordinary event was not without controversy, much of which has been dispelled (critics claim that much Michelangelo’s original work was lost in the removal of various accretions).²³

A Description of the ‘Creation of Adam’ Fresco

Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel fresco of the ‘Creation of Adam’ (See figure: 1) occupies the first of three central ceiling panels of the Sistine Chapel known as ‘The Creation and Downfall of Adam and Eve’ frescos. The three panels in sequence are (1) ‘God Creates

¹⁸ James H. Beck, “Michelangelo's Sacrifice on the Sistine ceiling.” *Renaissance Society and Culture* (1991): 9-22.

¹⁹ Patricia A. Emison, *Creating the "Divine" Artist : From Dante to Michelangelo*, Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 173.

²⁰ James Romaine, “Scripture on the Ceiling,” *Christian History & Biography* Issue 91 (Summer 2006): 22-26.

²¹ Varghese, *Michelangelo and the Human Dignity*, 333.

²² Jeffrey David, “The Sistine Restoration: a Renaissance for Michelangelo,” *National Geographic* 176 No. 6D (1989): 688-713.

²³ James M. Wall, “Controversy over the Sistine Ceiling,” *The Christian Century* Vol. 104 Issue 24 (8/26/87 – 9/2/87):708.

Adam,' (2) 'The Creation of Eve' and (3) 'Adam and Eve are Tempted and Sent from Eden' (See Figure: 3)²⁴. The three panels illuminate the Biblical story from the Book of Genesis where God the Father breathes life into the first man, Adam. These three panels were among the last frescoes to be finished as work on the ceiling neared completion.²⁵

In the 'Creation of Adam' fresco, God is portrayed as an old bearded man enveloped in a swirling cloak. Adam is entirely naked and positioned on the lower left.²⁶ God's right arm is extended as if imparting the spark of life into Adam, whose left arm is extended in a mirroring pose of God's.²⁷ The mirroring pose suggests the underscoring of humanity's creation in God's image. Notably, the fingers of Adam and God do not touch indicating that God, the giver of life, is reaching out to Adam with life.²⁸ Relative to this notion, Pittaluga points out:

From the powerful hand of the Almighty, life and strength flow to the still tender hand of the mortal and through his inert limbs. These limbs, moulded by the vibrating light and shade and bounded by clear-cut contours, stand out as if sculptured against the mountainside.²⁹

Moreover, much conjecture abounds about the significance of the 'Creation of Adam's' decidedly creative composition. Michelangelo's well-documented knowledge of human anatomy has led to such theories.³⁰ For example, in the background figures and shapes depicted behind the form of God there appears an anatomically correct representation of the human brain, with the frontal lobe, optic chiasm, brain stem, pituitary gland, and the major sulci of the cerebrum. Also, the red cloth around God is shaped like a human uterus, with the coloured green scarf hanging out signifying a newly cut umbilical cord.³¹

²⁴ These three panels of Figure 3 are the green panels in the centre of the plan.

²⁵ Maria Rzepińska, "The Divine Wisdom of Michelangelo in 'The Creation of Adam,'" *Artibus et Historiae* Vol. 15, No. 29 (1994): 181-187.

²⁶ James J. Buckley and Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt and Trent Pomplun (Ed's), *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 465.

²⁷ D. Z. Phillips and Mario Von der Ruhr, *Biblical Concepts and Our World*, Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 108.

²⁸ Varghese, *Michelangelo and the Human Dignity*, 252-257.

²⁹ Mary Pittaluga, *The Sistine Chapel* (Roma: Del Turco Editore, 1957), 42.

³⁰ Sue Tatem, *Michelangelo Faces and Anatomy in His Art* (United States: Xlibris Corp, 2010), 25, 75, 84.

³¹ Michelangelo Buonarroti; Pina Ragionieri; Miles L Chappell; Aaron H De Groft; Adriano Marinazzo; *Michelangelo, Anatomy As Architecture : Drawings By The Master* (Williamsburg, Virginia: Muscarelle Museum of Art, 2010), 36, 37, 55.

A Reflection on the Fresco

In the ‘Creation of Adam’ fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo painted the Genesis birth of Adam (Gen 2:19).³² God the Father, in appearance like the Biblical Moses character, reaches out to Adam as if to give life. This is perhaps an appropriate likeness as Moses was the Israelite spiritual father delivering messages from God to the people. Significantly, Michelangelo uses symbolism in this fresco. For example, the contour of the image around God and the angels resembles the shape of the mid anatomical cross-section of a human brain.³³

The ‘Creation of Adam’ composition presents a single theme illustrating the biblical creation narrative. When contrasted to the other panels, particularly the Eden panel, the intention of the artist is not as transparent. However, in the ‘Creation of Adam’ fresco misinterpretation is difficult, as within the Adam panel the symmetry of this creature on a summit coming to life is exposed. The lines upon which the fresco is ordered show this remarkable symmetry. This is best appreciated by tracings displaying symmetry and the connection between the two figures, which is fundamental to the work (See figure: 2).

This symmetry between the two figures suggests itself to be central to the work, as illustrated by the tracings long slightly curved lines linking the figures. The foremost line charts the curve of the arms passing through the hands and joining the shoulders. Similarly, the bodies and limbs of the two figures are connected by parallel planes, with God’s eyes gazing into the eyes of Adam. The viewer's eye is guided from right to left and returned, in an arc like swing movement creating subtle suggestions and situations between the two figures together with an impression of curved space (See figure: 2).

Notably, Michelangelo’s contemporary and early biographer, Ascanio Condivi, proposed that the Father, in order that Adam may know how to conduct himself, conveyed the Ten Commandments to Adam at the moment of parting.³⁴ This notion makes the setting of Adam’s birth a precursor to the future meeting on Mount Sinai of God with Moses where the Decalogue transpires (Exodus 19:20, 23; 24:26; 31:18).³⁵ In the ‘Creation of Adam’

³² *The Holy Bible*, NRSV Catholic Edition, 2. (This is the first mention of Adam).

³³ Tatem, *Michelangelo Secret Anatomy Book*, 49.

³⁴ Ascanio Condivi and Hellmut Wohl, *The Life of Michel-Angelo*, 2nd ed. (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 42.

³⁵ *The Holy Bible*, NRSV Catholic Edition, 1-48.

fresco the Creator appears in the role of the anxious father giving last minute advice to his departing son on how to deal with friend and foe in the course of the son's travels.

This transmission of advice from father to son might be interpreted in various ways. However, the intense tension of the fresco obviously springs from the extended hands of this relationship. Additionally, it comes from the sacred space that both separates and bonds them. The magnitude of the space between the hands of God and God's departing son becomes obvious upon imagining how the fresco would look if the breach between the two hands were closed. The narrative in the artwork would appear to reflect the story of the individual and society as well as the religious aspect. Johnson assists reflection on this point by stating:

Michelangelo himself saw his own creative powers as being divine and god-like. Not only was he pleased to be nicknamed 'The Divine One' (*Il Divino*) during his own lifetime, but many of the sonnets he wrote also equated the act of artistic creation with God's creation of Man. In fact, one can interpret Michelangelo's fresco of the 'Creation of Adam' painted in c. 1508–12 on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican (Figure 36) as a kind of metaphorical self-portrait in which the life-giving touch of God's hand is made comparable to the artist's own creative and generative hand.³⁶

Taking into consideration the fact that Michelangelo was deeply religious and enjoyed the pope's confidence, the source of his creativeness was possibly due to the Holy Scriptures that he knew so well, rather than either Neo-Platonism or the Cabala of the day.³⁷

Conclusion

Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam' fresco clarifies the Biblical creation account from the Book of Genesis depicting God breathing life into Adam, the first man. The claim that Michelangelo is one of the greatest artists of all time, and a man whose name has become synonymous with the word 'masterpiece,' has been supported by this analysis of the 'Creation of Adam' fresco. This analysis was assisted by consideration of Michelangelo's biography, a history of the Sistine Chapel, a description of the 'Creation of Adam' fresco, and a reflection on the fresco.

³⁶Geraldine A. Johnson, *Renaissance Art : A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123.

³⁷Rzepińska, "The Divine Wisdom of Michelangelo in 'The Creation of Adam,' " 181-187.

The 'Creation of Adam' fresco depicts a remarkable fresco painting forming an integral part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. It exemplifies the biblical creation narrative of God giving life to Adam. The near-touching image of the outstretched hands of God and Adam has become iconic of humanity. Michelangelo's knowledge of human anatomy is apparent in the fresco and its relationship to the frescoes' meaning. Moreover, Michelangelo's deeply religious convictions provide catalysis for theological reflection.

Reflection on artwork such as Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam' fresco in the Sistine Chapel assists the development of theological analytical skills within the context of the arts applying to individuals and communities, in the past, present and future. Artworks contribute to an appreciation of the Christian creed as cultural forms capable of expressing, illuminating and inspiring faith. Moreover, they contribute to understanding and experiencing spirituality. This is achieved by engaging artistic creations with both theological and aesthetic principles. Significantly, it enhances an appreciation for the role of art in the study of theology and the broader aspects of knowledge and learning.

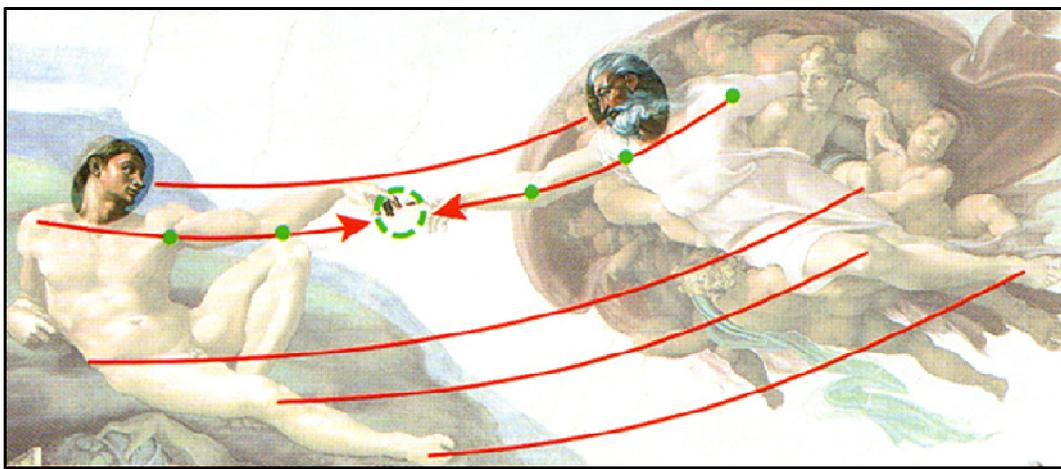
Appendix

Figure I: The 'Creation of Adam'



Source: Varghese, Kleetus K. *Michelangelo and the Human Dignity: An Anthropological Reading of the Sistine Frescoes*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corp., 2005. 181

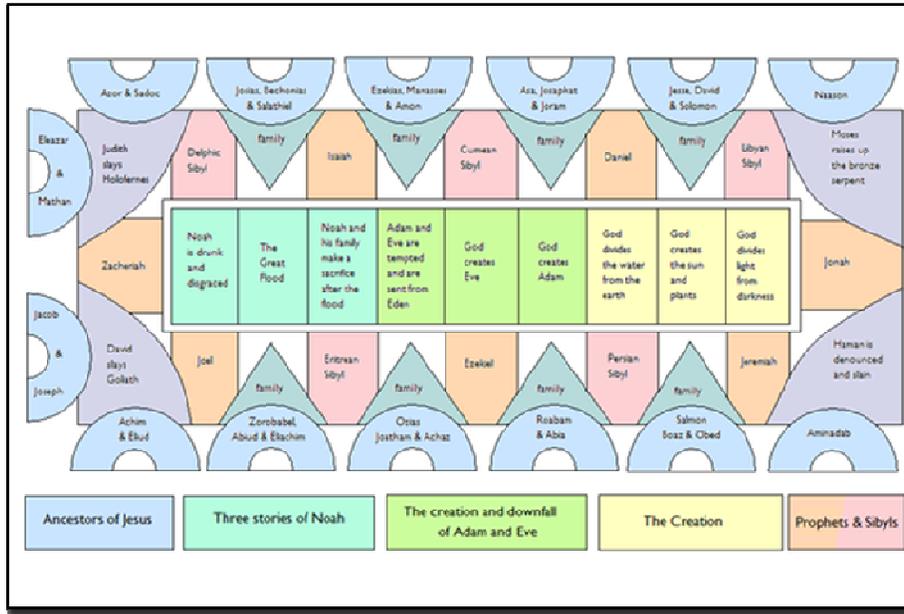
Figure 2: Tracing



Source: <http://www.all-art.org/history230-4.html>
Accessed on 18.10.13

Figure 3: Pictorial scheme (plan)

Plan of the pictorial elements of the ceiling showing the division of the narrative scenes into three parts themes.



Source: Crispino, Enrica. *Michelangelo*. 1st ed, Artist's Life. Firenze: Giunti, 2001.

Figure 4: Pictorial scheme (ceiling)



Source: Crispino, Enrica. *Michelangelo*. 1st ed, Artist's Life. Firenze: Giunti, 2001.

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