

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 91: Michelangelo: Art for Faith's Sake

Michelangelo: Did You Know?

Interesting facts about Michelangelo and the Renaissance

Bringing a masterpiece back to life

For centuries, the Sistine Chapel frescoes were characterized by muted colors and dark shadows. Some people even assumed that Michelangelo, who saw himself as a sculptor rather than a painter, was more interested in form than color. But a major restoration project in the 1980s showed what a thorough cleaning can do. Over the course of a decade and in the center of a swirling international controversy, conservators used computer technology and chemical solvents to repair damaged sections and wipe away the accumulated grime. Their efforts uncovered a brilliantly colorful ceiling that revealed Michelangelo's genius anew. When the project was completed in 1990, the *New York Times* called the result "overwhelmingly beautiful." Restoration of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* on the altar wall soon followed.

Mortal hero

Michelangelo's reputation was so immense that contemporaries lauded him as "the divine Michelangelo." But before his death the aging artist wrote to a friend that he was only "a poor man and of little value, a man who goes along laboring in that art which God has given me for as long as I possibly can."

Investigating the past

During the Renaissance, the humanists' efforts to study ancient texts and to purify Christianity [see p. 14] led to a number of groundbreaking discoveries. The classical scholar Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) proved that the "Donation of Constantine" a document granting the pope temporal power over the Western Roman Empire could not have been written by the emperor Constantine but was a later forgery. Valla also shocked the church by arguing that the twelve apostles did not compose the Apostles' Creed and that the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible was full of errors when compared to early Greek manuscripts. His work deeply influenced Erasmus of Rotterdam, who published an edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, as well as the Protestant Reformers.

Dr. Luke, the artist

During the Renaissance, artists' guilds adopted as their patron saint the author of the third gospel, and a 16th-century painting academy in Rome was even named after him. Why? According to an early tradition, Luke was not only a physician but also a painter. One legend held the wife of Emperor Theodosius II brought back from the Holy Land a portrait of the Virgin Mary painted from life by Luke himself.

Celebrity profile

Much of what we know about the life of Michelangelo, as well as many other Renaissance artists, comes from the painter, architect, and biographer Georgio Vasari (1511-74). Vasari's immensely popular *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, first published in 1550 and expanded and revised in 1568, laid the foundation for centuries of art historians. It chronicles the development of Italian art from the 14th to the 16th centuries, climaxing in Michelangelo, whom Vasari idolized.

Michelangelo, on the other hand, didn't have the same high opinion of Vasari's first edition. He had his pupil Ascanio Condivi write another account of his life to set the record straight.

Sistine distress

Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican may be a feast for the eyes [see p. 22], but painting it was no picnic. The cramped position atop high scaffolding for four years caused him enormous discomfort. He spent so much time looking **up** while working on the ceiling that it was some time before his eyes could adjust to looking **down** again for a while, he had to read things by holding them over his head. He described his misery in a poem: "My beard toward heaven, I feel the back of my brain / Upon my neck) / My brush, above my face continually, / Makes it a splendid floor by dripping down."

Playful prodigy

As a young teenager, Michelangelo worked for a short time as an apprentice in the workshop of a local Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. Ghirlandaio gave him one of his own paintings to copy as an exercise. Michelangelo, not entirely appreciative of his master's talents, copied the painting and then, as a prank, passed off his copy as the original. As biographer James Beck describes, "he even doctored his panel with smoke so that it would appear the same age as Ghirlandaio's." The precocious artist didn't stay in that workshop much longer.

Signature piece

According to Vasari and other early biographers, while Michelangelo was an up-and-coming young sculptor in Rome he overheard some people discussing his new **Pietà** in St. Peter's Basilica [see p. 27] and attributing it to another artist. Michelangelo was irritated that the praise for all of his hard work was wrongly going to someone else, so he returned at night and carved the words "Michelangelo Buonoratti, Florentine, made this" in a prominent place on the sash across Mary's chest. He never again signed any of his work.

The scent of genius

One of the most infamous events in Michelangelo's long life was his argument as a young man with another artist, Pietro Torrigiani, possibly over the merits of one of Michelangelo's favorite painters, Masaccio. The squabble ended when the jealous, hot-tempered Torrigiani punched Michelangelo in the nose so hard that (he bragged later) "I felt the bone and cartilage of the nose give way, as if it were sponge cake; and thus, marked by me, he will remain for the rest of his life." Michelangelo's permanently squashed nose was a lifelong sore point in his self-image and shows up in numerous portraits of the artist. So legendary has this deformed protuberance become that art historian Paul Barolsky even centered an entire psychological study of Michelangelo around, as he puts it, one of the greatest noses in history.

An ancestry to brag about

Michelangelo was born in this house in the town of Caprese in the hills of Tuscany. Though their fortunes had declined, his family took great pride in being descended from Mantuan counts of Canossa who also came to have great holdings in Tuscany through the remarkable Countess Matilda (1046-1114). Matilda was learned, devout, and an unswerving ally of the papacy. Her most famous historical moment came in January 1077, when, as a result of her intercession, the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, humbly did penance and submitted (at least for a while) to the reform-minded Pope Gregory VII (c.1021-85) at Matilda's mountain stronghold at Canossa. **contributed by Laurel Gasque**

You must be born again

Some historians have identified Michelangelo as part of a religious circle known as "Nicodemites" (a term used by John Calvin, alluding to the Pharisee who came to Jesus only by night for fear of being discovered in conversation with him). For the Genevan reformer, "Nicodemites" were those who concealed their Protestant beliefs behind an outward show of Catholic conformity a kind of cowardice. However, for those who took the name for themselves, it could be a badge of honor. After all, Nicodemus showed up courageously and faithfully at the crucifixion. [For more about Michelangelo's relation to the Reformation, see "The Art of Grace" on p. 32.] ***contributed by Laurel Gasque***

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Michelangelo: From the Editor - A Flood of Pictures

Jennifer Trafton

I had a succession of wonderful Sunday School teachers growing up, but there was one I never had, and I was secretly jealous of my younger brother, who did: His name was Marvin Jarboe, and he was (and still is) a professional artist and stained glass window maker. Most Sunday School classes listened to the story of Noah's ark. Marvin's class made Noah's ark—a large, elaborate replica built out of toothpicks, with handmade ceramic animals. Such artistic sophistication was the deep envy of someone whose earliest, cherished church-related memory was pasting cotton balls on pictures of sheep. Oh, how I wanted to be in Marvin's class.

You can imagine, therefore, how much I have loved editing this issue of *Christian History & Biography*. I have spent three months surrounded by photographs of some of the world's most magnificent masterpieces of religious art. The hardest decisions facing our team have been how to narrow down the vast array of possible images to what will fit into the magazine, and whether to picture the intense, almost iconic gaze of Michelangelo's *David* or the dynamic colors of the Sistine Chapel ceiling on the cover. Rough life.

In addition to the theme section's focus on Michelangelo and the Italian Renaissance, art has found its way into every one of our departments in this issue, from David Morgan's story behind the most beloved modern painting of Jesus, to the late church historian Jaroslav Pelikan's love of pelican iconography, to St. Antony's fight with the demons in medieval painting. This is not entirely a matter of editorial selection. Quietly, vibrantly, without words, with subtle power, the visual tradition of the church has exerted a profound and widespread influence on Christian belief and practice. Alongside those who have helped us understand the story of Noah's ark with our minds, there have always been those who have re-made Noah's ark for a new generation and expressed the eternal truths of Christianity through pigment, marble, clay, graphite, glass, or even toothpicks.

Perhaps it is more important than ever for us to understand this artistic heritage. After centuries of being a word-based culture, the West is moving back to being a visual culture. For better or worse, it is becoming more and more the case that the way to people's hearts is through their eyes.

This issue of *CH&B* is, therefore, our attempt to make sure artists have their rightful place among the theologians, preachers, teachers, missionaries, writers, and social reformers who populate our Christian history hall of fame. It is also an attempt to tell the story of a particular historical moment *through* art—to examine what art can tell us about what artists and their communities believed, how they worshiped, what important issues were at stake in the church, and how the church was responding to the cultural changes of that time. Special thanks to Laurel Gasque, John Skillen, and Rachel Smith for lending us their expertise at various points in the editorial process.

In all of our issues we take great pride in compiling the best visual material to enhance the story we're telling. In this issue, the images themselves take center stage. Therefore assistant editor Rebecca Golossanov deserves extra kudos for her efforts in finding and securing permissions for high-quality art reproductions. We are also very grateful to Doug Johnson for his beautiful design work as guest art director. Our prayers continue to go out to our art director *emeritus* Raymond Whitlock and his family as he battles cancer.

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Living History

Compiled by David Neff and Rebecca Golossanov

Pope's bodyguards turn 500

Everyone who visits the Vatican notices the colorfully dressed Swiss Guards who provide security for the Pope. This year marks the 500th anniversary of this elite military unit. And Robert Royal has written *The Pope's Army* (Crossroad) to celebrate their history.

According to legend, Michelangelo designed the uniforms, but no one really knows who created them. The outfits are pictured in frescoes by Raphael (1483-1520), and in the early 20th century, the Swiss Guards used those paintings to recreate the original costumes.

The Swiss Guards' colorful history begins with Pope Julius II, who also commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Julius inherited a weakened papacy and he needed expert soldiers in order to help him regain his lost territory. At the time, the Swiss were known as the best fighters.

Here are a few highlights from Royal's history:

- In 1527, the Swiss Guards saved the life of Pope Clement VII when the Holy Roman Emperor sacked Rome and attacked the Vatican. The Guards rushed Clement to a secret passageway that led to the fortified Castel Sant'Angelo, while one of his cardinals held up a purple cloak to hide him from view.
- In 1943, during World War II, German bombs struck the Vatican wine cellar and broke about a hundred bottles of fine cognac. There was a pool of liquor six inches deep, and the Swiss soldier who discovered the damage fetched his fellow soldiers to make good use of what might have been a tragic waste.
- With the popes' eventual loss of political power, they learned to become pastors to the world. As a result, the role of the Swiss Guard changed from a military to a ceremonial one. Nevertheless, in an age of terrorism, the Guard still needs to protect the Pope's life. In 1970, an assassin tried to kill Paul VI in Manila. And in 1981, another assassin assaulted John Paul II in St. Peter's Square.

From Jan Hus to techno

It's not unusual to hear Christians complain when old European churches are turned into nightclubs, restaurants, museums, or even one-of-a-kind dwellings. But who would have expected a group of nearly 100 university students to stage a protest march over a former church building? That's what happened this spring in Prague, Czech Republic.

According to the *Prague Post*, St. Michal's Church in Prague's Old Town is one of hundreds of Czech church buildings that have languished in disrepair. Neither the government nor the Catholic Church has the funds to maintain these historic buildings.

In 1948, the Communists nationalized all church properties in Czechoslovakia. By the mid-'80s, the 800-year-old St. Michal's was in the hands of the National Library, which lacked the money to keep it

in repair. To preserve the building, which is officially listed as a cultural heritage site, the Library sold it to a company that planned to turn the building where proto-reformer Jan Hus once preached into a bank.

As plans for the bank unraveled, events turned toward the weird. The new owner transformed the building into St. Michal's Mystery, a tourist attraction featuring 14 multimedia presentations of Franz Kafka's nightmares. When the tourist season waned, he rented the facility out for private parties, which critics say included techno parties and stripteases.

St. Michal's hasn't served as a church for over 200 years. (The last Mass was celebrated there in 1786.) Since then, it has served as a store, a pub, a crystal shop, and a café. But for Prague university students, some things are just over the top—and that includes techno parties in a historic church.

Sinai monastery comes to L.A.

This fall you can make a pilgrimage to a holy site—by visiting an art museum. In a groundbreaking exhibition, the J. Paul Getty Museum will recreate the ambiance of St. Catharine's monastery in Egypt, one of the oldest monasteries in the world. Rare icons, manuscripts, and liturgical objects from St. Catharine's are traveling to Los Angeles where they will participate in an exploration of art and liturgy.

The monastery was founded in the 6th century by the emperor Justinian and has been in continuous use ever since. Thanks to its isolated location at the base of Mt. Sinai, St. Catharine's held out during the iconoclastic controversies of the 8th and 9th centuries during which monks were persecuted and icons were smashed. Thus their collection contains rare pre-iconoclastic icons, including a 6th-century icon of St. Peter.

Since at least the 5th century, Eastern Christians have used icons devotionally to communicate theological truths, to honor Christ and the saints, and ultimately to direct their affections to God.

The exhibition, "Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons From Sinai," is broken into three sections: "Holy Image" will focus on icons, "Holy Space" will depict the role of devotional objects in the liturgy, and "Holy Site" will feature a film of Easter services at St. Catharine's. The exhibition opens November 14 and continues through March 4, 2007. For more information, visit www.getty.edu/museum/.

Every knee shall bow?

In the 17th century, English Puritans rejected kneeling at Communion because they thought it implied "Romish" idolatry. But today, some Roman Catholics are challenging their bishop in order to be allowed to kneel in church. Last spring the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the archdiocese of Orange County, California, has instructed its congregants to stand rather than kneel at certain moments of the Communion service, but many are refusing to get off their knees.

The conflict reveals two opposing ideologies. The "modern" camp views kneeling as a remnant of feudalism that should be exchanged for standing, which, the archdiocese says, better reflects "human dignity ... that we are made in the image and likeness of God." The "traditional" camp believes kneeling is superior because it is submissive, reverent, and worshipful. As one parishioner said, kneeling is praying "with our bodies, not just our minds."

Debates over kneeling aren't new. Although many Christians by the second century believed kneeling was too solemn for Sunday services, not everyone agreed. Tertullian, writing about the conflict, said that he hoped "the dissentients may either yield, or else indulge their opinion without offense to others." In the early Middle Ages, the Western church introduced more kneeling when it placed greater

emphasis on Christ's presence in the Mass.

The official change came four years ago when the Vatican instructed, "The faithful kneel ... unless the Diocesan Bishop determines otherwise." Now that some U.S. bishops are removing the posture altogether, new churches often don't have kneelers and some older churches are eliminating theirs. For the devoted traditionalist, this makes for sore knees.

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The Face That's Everywhere

We've all seen it. An entire generation grew up with this image of Jesus in their minds. But who made it, and how did it become so popular?

David Morgan

There is a brownish image of Jesus that hangs on children's bedroom walls, in fellowship halls of Catholic and Protestant churches around the country, in mission stations around the world. Even the most Protestant of Protestants knows the picture from Sunday school days or Grandma's living room. But most can't name the painter and wrongly assume that he was Methodist or Lutheran or Catholic. His name, in fact, was Warner Sallman (1892-1968), and he spent his entire life in Chicago. Of Swedish and Finnish extraction, he was a lifelong member of the (Swedish) Evangelical Covenant Church.

A pious man by all accounts, Sallman worked as a freelance illustrator, producing religious imagery for a variety of publications including the Evangelical Covenant Church's denominational magazine **Covenant Companion** in the 1920s and the Salvation Army's **War Cry** in the 1930s. The charcoal sketch called "The Son of Man," which appeared on the cover of the **Covenant Companion** in 1924, attracted enough admirers over the years that Sallman painted an oil version in 1940. The image was titled "The Head of Christ." For many people, this image of Jesus, composed like a photographic portrait, looked like the serene "best friend" they wanted in their Savior.

The Baptist Bookstore picked up various sizes of the lithographic image and placed it in bookstores across the South. A growing variety of products using Sallman's painting appeared religious instructional materials, prints, gift items, and eventually clocks, lamps, buttons, mottoes or Scripture texts, Bibles, and puzzles. Impressed by the avid public response, Sallman's publishers urged him to produce several images from the life of Jesus using the same likeness. An enterprising commercial illustrator, Sallman studied many visual precedents used in devotional settings and produced by other religious publishers and based most of his very successful images on them, such as "Christ in Gethsemane," "Christ at Heart's Door," "The Lord is My Shepherd," and "Christ Our Pilot," produced from 1942 to 1950.

The World War II context was equally important for the dissemination and popular reception of Sallman's chief image, "The Head of Christ." The Salvation Army and the YMCA, both members of the USO, handed out pocket-sized versions of the picture to American soldiers leaving for Europe and Asia. Millions of copies found their way around the world and became a fondly remembered part of the war experience for many veterans.

After the war, groups in Oklahoma and Indiana conducted broad campaigns to distribute the picture across private and public spheres. A Lutheran organizer of the effort in Indiana said that there ought to be "card-carrying Christians" to counter the effect of "card-carrying Communists." Copies of Sallman's "Head of Christ" were placed in public libraries, schools, police departments, community centers, and even in courtrooms. One photograph from 1962 shows Vice President Lyndon Johnson posing reverently beside a copy of the picture sent to him in Washington. Today, the portrait of Jesus is still found in both Protestant and Catholic churches, enjoys fond use among Mormons, Latinos, Native Americans, and African Americans, and hangs in Christian homes in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe.

While Protestants have historically resisted using pictures in their worship, they often do, in fact, rely on Sallman's images and others in teaching children, in evangelism, and in decorating their homes. For many of them, these activities are as important for everyday life as public worship, especially in forming

the early faith of children in ways that will continue to shape their piety for the rest of their lives. This is why even a glimpse of Sallman's pictures can open a deluge of memories. The picture hangs around.

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Painting the Town Holy

Rebirth and reform in Renaissance Italy.

Jennifer Trafton

At the beginning of C. S. Lewis's novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the Pevensie children are astonished by how real a painting of a ship on the bedroom wall looks. It has depth and movement and is so lifelike they can almost feel the ocean spray. As they step forward to take a closer look, they are drawn straight through the frame of the painting into the world of Narnia. No longer spectators, they have become participants in the story.

The painting in this chapter of Lewis's novel is not just a pretty picture on a wall to be admired but a window—even a doorway—into something beyond itself, a new kind of reality, a story that can draw viewers in and transform them. Many 21st-century Protestants may find this concept foreign, but in the 14th through the 16th centuries, this is precisely what artists were after. In an age whirling with changes, art—reaching a magnificent level of naturalism not seen since the days of the ancient Greeks and Romans—had a vital role to play.

A shift in outlook was sweeping through Western Europe, starting in Italy and spreading north into Germany, France, England, and the Netherlands. Those living in that time spoke of *rinnovato*—renewal—to describe their sense of entering a new age very different from the early Middle Ages. Nineteenth-century historians later called it the "Renaissance" (rebirth). For the church, it was a hinge between medieval faith, piety, and church order on the one hand and the Protestant and Catholic Reformations on the other. Some of the same impulses that drove the reformers to clear away the obstructions to pure, biblical Christianity motivated Renaissance artists to dive back into the past, recover the styles and techniques of classical sculpture, and make the Old into something radically New.

It was a time of experimentation—with artistic techniques, philosophical ideas, religious beliefs, political and scientific theories, and new technologies like the printing press. It was a time of exploration—to wild, undiscovered lands beyond the Atlantic Ocean and to the seemingly inexhaustible limits of human reason and creativity. It was also a time when ideals and reality didn't always match up.

Picture this

It may seem strange to say that a culture that produced Machiavelli's political philosophy, a slew of corrupt despots constantly at war with each other, and a notorious pope like Alexander VI, devoted to women, wealth, and his ten illegitimate children, was also a culture thoroughly steeped in Christianity. But that was the case. Fifteenth-century Italy wove religion into the fabric of everyday existence. Life was liturgical—measured in holy days, feasts, festivals, baptisms, masses, penances, marriages, and last rites.

At the same time, many people knew that all was not well in the land of piazzas and pilgrimages. Over the course of the century and into the next, there was increasing dissatisfaction with the state of the institutional church and the moral decay of society, accompanied by a desire for more authentic expressions of faith. In the monastic communities, this took the form of "observant" orders, which called for a return to the moral standards and spiritual dedication of their founders. Laypeople sought out personal, emotionally engaging forms of spirituality, and new "confraternities" allowed the laity to actively participate in worship and in devotional rituals that were previously the exclusive privilege of

clergy and monks.

In this highly visual culture, Christianity, society, and art were inextricably linked. Works of art were not made to hang passively in museums. They were essential parts of the public landscape, with specific purposes. Statues in town squares symbolized political clout or civic allegiance. Carved pulpits and stained glass windows preached biblical stories in pictures. Elaborately decorated crucifixes and altarpieces inspired spiritual feeling and devotional commitment. Grand buildings proclaimed the power of a pope or the prestige of an aristocratic family. Murals in monasteries or private chapels chronicled the lives of founders, ancestors, and saints.

Patrons who commissioned these works—whether popes, churches, monastic orders, town guilds, or individual citizens—did so because they knew that art was powerful. It could establish social status, assert authority, teach doctrine, evoke emotions, incite someone to prayer or action, and lead to social change. Therefore the style and content of art was not just a matter of taste. It could have profound—even eternal—consequences.

Most artists were not independent geniuses "doing their own thing"—at least until the appearance of larger-than-life figures such as Michelangelo. They were members of a community, with responsibilities to that community and with the ability to express visually that community's deepest concerns. And in an age of such enormous cultural and religious transitions as the Renaissance, this was power indeed.

Oh, the humanity!

"Without Plato," said the Florentine statesman Lorenzo de' Medici, "it would be hard to be a good Christian or a good citizen." This statement has been called the manifesto of humanism, one of the most important forces behind the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries. Later, the Enlightenment thinkers looked back at the humanists as the forerunners of individualism and secularism. But in reality—as Timothy Verdon and others have shown—they were very concerned with exactly what Lorenzo said: how to be good Christians.

Modern conservative Christians have the slogan "Back to the Bible." Renaissance humanist and biblical scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam had a similar slogan: *Ad fontes*, "Back to the sources." The phrase captures his age's hunger to recover something that had been lost, a golden era before the medieval "Dark Age" muddied the window of vision. If only we were more like ancient Athens or Rome, thought the humanists, our government and our society would not be so corrupt. If only we could learn to make art like the Greeks and Romans did, we could achieve ideal beauty. If only we could study the earliest biblical manuscripts in their original languages, we could understand what Scripture means. If only we could go back to the purer, simpler faith of the early church fathers, we could get closer to God.

The humanists had boundless optimism about human potential ("A man can do all things if he will," pronounced Leon Battista Alberti), though they also recognized that free will could cut two ways. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico della Mirandola wrote that humans may use their unique, God-given freedom to rise to become like angels or sink to the level of beasts.

For the humanists, exalting the beauty of the natural world and the inherent worth of human beings created in the image of God was a way of worshiping God himself. They believed in the ennobling effects of education and the continuity between the wisdom of antiquity and the truth of Christianity. Their delight in Latin and Greek literature extended not just to Plato, Cicero, and Caesar but also to early church fathers like Augustine and Jerome.

In their quest for the purity of the past, humanists stressed that Christianity was not a matter of endless ceremonies and rites but an inward affair of faith and individual conscience rooted in the example of Christ. As Erasmus scolded, "If you believe in what takes place at the altar but fail to enter into the

spiritual meaning of it, God will despise your flabby religion." In this and many other ways, they fed the fires of Protestant reform, particularly in northern Europe.

Seeing is believing?

Humanism was a movement among intellectuals, but similar changes were afoot throughout the church. Since the 12th century, there had been a growing emphasis on the humanity of Christ, particularly in his suffering and death. St. Francis, who had brought a joyful love of nature to the common people, so identified with Christ's physical sufferings that he miraculously received the "stigmata"—wounds in his hands and feet like those Jesus bore. His followers emphasized both in their piety and their preaching the image of the fully divine yet fully human, crucified Savior. Fifteenth-century devotional practices called worshipers to enter imaginatively into the scene of Christ's passion, and so be transformed.

These new intellectual and religious attitudes demanded a new kind of art. The two-dimensional, highly symbolic icons of the early Middle Ages were intended to evoke an eternal reality, not a this-worldly one. Driven by a new goal to "imitate nature," Renaissance artists looked back to the sculptures of classical antiquity for inspiration. They developed techniques—including the use of perspective—to make their statues and paintings as lifelike as possible and to create the illusion of three-dimensional space.

In part, this reflected the humanist concern to portray the beauty of the creation and the dignity of the human being, but the aims of devotional art went beyond that. The sixth-century pope Gregory the Great had called paintings "books of the illiterate," and the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 had legitimized the veneration of images. Renaissance naturalism, however, took the relationship between a work of art and its viewer to a whole new realm.

The abstract doctrines and Scriptural stories of the church became concrete, visible, almost palpable. People could **experience** the events and emotions they were seeing in a visceral, transformative way. It is no coincidence that this was also the era of elaborate theatrical productions, particularly during Holy Week, bringing the passion of Christ to life before people's eyes with unprecedented realism and special effects.

Reforming art

But there were cracks beneath the surface. The visual splendor and opulence of Renaissance Italy at times betrayed an underlying greed on the part of some patrons, who were willing to spend money on art to show off or gain spiritual merit but ignored the needs of the poor. What would St. Dominic think, asked the Dominican Archbishop Antonius, of "houses and cells enlarged, vaulted, raised to the sky, and most frivolously adorned with superfluous sculptures and paintings?"

The fiery preacher and reformer Girolamo Savonarola not only scoffed at the idea that classical philosophy and the Bible were compatible—"Any old woman knows more about the faith than Plato"—he also condemned the tendency among some Renaissance artists to flirt with paganism at the expense of piety: "Do you imagine that the Virgin Mary went about dressed as she is shown in paintings? I tell you she went about dressed like a poor person with simplicity and her face so covered that it was hardly seen. ... You make the Virgin Mary look like a whore. How the worship of God is mocked!" The fact that some artists cast their "worldly" paintings into Savonarola's "bonfire of vanities" in the center of Florence is evidence that his words hit home.

After 1500, reforming voices increasingly questioned the state of the church, and the state of art also came under close scrutiny. Artists, patrons, and church leaders debated the proper function of images, the issue of nudity, and the merging of biblical stories with classical myths and apocryphal legends. Protestant reformers abhorred the way laypeople blurred the boundaries between veneration of images

and idolatry, as well as the church's sale of indulgences to pay the bills of papal art projects. Catholic reformers at the Council of Trent, in addition to addressing the Protestant challenge, reaffirmed the use of images in worship but laid down much stricter criteria for style and content.

The soul of the beholder

The issues at stake in Renaissance art went to the very heart of the church and its worship:

If we truly believe that God was incarnate in Christ, and that Christ was fully human as well as fully divine, then what does that say about the goodness of the created order and the dignity of the human being? What does it mean to be truly human in this world? Is nature a prison to be escaped or a beautiful creation of God to be celebrated?

If the Creator God made us creative beings, how should we exercise that creativity?

What should be the focus of our worship? What should our minds be contemplating: Christ's saints or Christ himself? the sufferings of Christ or his triumph over suffering and death?

If visual images have such a powerful effect on the way people think, feel, believe, and behave, then how should the church wield that power—if at all?

Five hundred years later, these questions are still relevant. As we search for answers, we could certainly do worse than take a closer look at the Christ-haunted, art-drenched world of Renaissance Italy. We might even find ourselves sucked through a picture frame into a story beyond.

Jennifer Trafton is managing editor of Christian History & Biography. For sources this article drew upon, see the Recommended Resources section.

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Larger Than Life

Michelangelo Buonarroti reached the pinnacle of fame as a sculptor, painter, and architect, yet he longed for something more.

Laurel Gasque

In 1505, Pope Julius II called a much-admired Florentine sculptor named Michelangelo to Rome to create a huge, freestanding tomb with approximately 40 over-life-size marble statues, all to be made within five years. When the pope saw Michelangelo's design, he was so delighted that he dispatched the artist immediately to the stupendous marble quarries of Carrara, not far from the Italian coast in Tuscany, to find suitable stone.

While Michelangelo was considering the landscape, he was seized with the idea of carving a colossus out of a mountain that would be visible to seafarers from afar (one presumes comparable to the great Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). Although 94 wagonloads of marble were quarried and shipped back to Rome, the papal tomb was never completed according to the original plan. Neither was a gigantic figure ever carved from the mountain face by the shores of Tuscany.

Michelangelo himself became the true Colossus of Tuscany. Sculptor, painter, poet, architect, and sincere Christian—he embodied the grand tensions, complexities, uncertainties, and achievements of his era. His name is synonymous with the glory of the Renaissance.

Tuscan son

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born on March 6, 1475, in the tiny town of Caprese in the Apennine Mountains. He was the second of five sons of Lodovico di Lionardo Buonarroti Simoni, then 167th Florentine Podestà (commissioner) of that town. Just months after the birth of Michelangelo (who was named after an archangel), the family returned relatively impoverished to the Santa Croce district of Florence, where for centuries they had claimed residence and ancient nobility. Soon Michelangelo was sent to a wet nurse, a daughter and wife of a stonemason. In jest he always claimed to have imbibed with her milk the desire and propensity for shaping stone.

Michelangelo's mother died when he was six years old, and four years later his father remarried. His father and stepmother believed that his desire to become an artist (which he showed at an early age) was beneath the dignity of the family, since artists at that time were considered craftsmen and therefore working class. Ludovico eventually relented, however, and placed Michelangelo in the Florentine studio of the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio as an apprentice. But the teenage Michelangelo was not entirely happy in this position and came to prefer sculpture over painting. Through his friendship with another artist, he found his way to the artistic community working in the Medici Gardens near the convent of San Marco.

Here he shared in the intimate family circle of Lorenzo de' Medici the Magnificent (1449-1492), a remarkable statesman and patron of the arts who soon became a mentor to the young artist. Michelangelo was able to mingle with some of the sharpest minds and most gifted humanists of the period and to study many examples of classical art, as well the radical new styles of early Renaissance artists such as the painter Masaccio and the sculptor Donatello. The fertile creative atmosphere of the Medici community left Michelangelo free to develop his own personal style,

and his great talents won him far-reaching admiration.

The voice of the preacher

This period of Michelangelo's life was as spiritually formative as it was artistically formative, due to the influence of the fervent Dominican friar and social reformer, Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498). As prior of the convent of San Marco, Savonarola preached against the Medici's abuse of power as well as the indulgent and immoral lifestyle of civil leaders and clergy alike, including the pope.

Savonarola became the leader of a Florentine republic for a brief time, but eventually he was excommunicated, tortured, charged with heresy, hanged, burned with two other followers in the main piazza of Florence, and his ashes dumped in the River Arno. Yet the memory of Savonarola's writings, even "the living voice" of his sermons, never left Michelangelo. The friar's criticism of the church's moral decay and external ceremonies and his preaching of salvation by faith continued to echo in the artist's mind. In these impressionable early years, the scene was set for a lifelong war in his soul between perfect physical beauty and perfect spiritual goodness.

Handy with a chisel

As Savonarola was being consigned to the flames in Florence, Michelangelo was well on his way to the highest ranks of ecclesiastical patronage in Rome. A French cardinal commissioned a *Pietà*. For this memorable work, which Michelangelo completed in 1499, he combined the conventional artistic theme of the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Jesus with a classical style to create one of the most stirring yet serene works of devotional art in history.

From that point on, Michelangelo's reputation as a sculptor was sealed. In 1504, at the request of the city of Florence, he completed his towering statue of *David*, carved to perfection from a flawed marble block cast off by another sculptor—a stunning example of Michelangelo's uncanny ability to see the figure in the block of stone even before he started to sculpt. The artist's growing fame brought him to the attention of Pope Julius II, and the next year the ambitious young Michelangelo found himself in Rome with an enormous assignment: the pope's own tomb.

Painter with a papal paycheck

Thirteen popes held office during the course of Michelangelo's life, and not all of them were scoundrels. But whether they were corrupt or charismatic, the popes of this period were unquestionably brilliant patrons of the arts and learning. Competition for papal patronage was fierce, with artists like Leonardo and Raphael vying with Michelangelo for attention.

Julius II, the warrior pope who put on armor and rode off to do battle for Italy and the Holy See, proved to be one of Michelangelo's most supportive—and cantankerous—patrons (a relationship immortalized by Charlton Heston and Rex Harrison in the 1965 film, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*). Michelangelo had barely finished a few individual statues for the proposed tomb when Julius had a change of heart, possibly because he had heard that it was bad luck to make one's own tomb while still alive. He ordered Michelangelo to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, built by his uncle Pope Sixtus IV. Michelangelo initially resisted this assignment, objecting that "painting was not my art." He was already deeply invested in the tomb project and anxious for it to proceed. However, the sculptor reluctantly traded his chisel for a paintbrush.

Michelangelo took four years to complete the ceiling, most of the time high above the ground on scaffolding he had designed himself. The impatient pope demanded to know when he would finish. When the artist cheekily replied, "When I can," Julius retorted, "You want me to have you thrown off the scaffolding!" But the wait was not in vain. As Michelangelo unveiled his work and the

crowds poured in to see it, the result was so resplendent that he was proclaimed "the greatest living artist."

To be sure, Julius was not easily satisfied. "It really ought to be retouched with gold," he complained. "It will look poor." Not relishing the idea of rebuilding the scaffolding, Michelangelo answered, "Those who are depicted there, they were poor too." The ceiling stayed the way it was.

Ennobling love

In the first few decades of the 16th century, while Europe was surging with radical religious reform and political unrest, Michelangelo was swamped with commissions that proved his skills not only as a sculptor and a painter but as an architect as well. A political republican, he even served as chief engineer of Florence's military defenses until Pope Clement VII and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V suppressed the Florentine republic in 1529-30. In 1535, the new pope Paul III commissioned him to paint a depiction of the Last Judgment on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel.

Around the time he was painting *The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo, now nearly 60, met two people who would have a profound personal impact on his life and faith: Tommaso de' Cavalieri (1516-1574) and Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547).

By all accounts, both Cavalieri and Colonna were of outstanding character and intelligence. Both came from ancient families. Tommaso was beautiful in appearance. Vittoria, widow of the Marchese of Pescara, radiated the inner beauty of a devout heart. Both inspired adoration in Michelangelo. In his own words, "Whenever I see someone who is good for something, who shows some power of the mind, who can do or say something better than the others, I am compelled to fall in love with him, and give myself to him as booty, so that I am no longer my own, but all his."

Words like these taken at face value (with little consideration for the ambiguity in the use of pronouns in Italian), along with his friendship with Cavalieri, have caused many people in recent times to argue that Michelangelo was a homosexual. Some of his own contemporaries suspected him of this, and he denied the charge.

His poetry attests to the fact that he was no stranger to lust and guilt, whether from acts or thoughts alone. The conflict between his deep admiration for earthly beauty and his yearning for a love that transcended physical desires—"the tension between nature passionately loved and grace passionately longed for," as Dixon puts it—was a source of tortuous inner struggles. However, as Michelangelo scholars John W. Dixon and James Beck have argued, there is no historical evidence that he ever had sexual relations with anyone, man or woman. He claimed he was married only to his art.

Loving others, for Michelangelo, was a way of loving God. Cavalieri and Colonna brought him nearer to Christ. In a madrigal addressed to Colonna, he wrote, "In your face I aspire to what I am pledged from heaven."

Saving grace

Vittoria Colonna was Michelangelo's intimate link to a wide range of reforming currents from Rome to Geneva. The learned Marchesa (who was also a poet) was close to the pulsing center of a circle of reform-minded Catholics at Viterbo known as the *Spirituali*. She read a commentary on Romans by Juan de Valdès and probably met the winsome Spaniard at his villa near Naples, where he gathered a group of the shakers and makers of his day around him to consider spiritual matters. Though he remained a Catholic, his ideas were not far from those of contemporary Protestant thinkers, especially concerning justification by faith.

The Capuchin friar and charismatic preacher Bernardino Ochino, a friend of Valdès, became

Colonna's closest spiritual advisor until he broke with the Catholic church during the Roman Inquisition of 1542. Ochino helped bring a Christ-centered focus to her faith—a spiritual journey she shared with Michelangelo. According to Michelangelo's friend and biographer Ascanio Condivi, he "read the Holy Scriptures with great application and study, both the Old Testament and the New, as well as the writings of those who have studied them, such as Savonarola, for whom he has always had great affection and whose voice still lives in his memory."

Painfully conscious of his own sinfulness and beginning to doubt his earlier preoccupation with ideal beauty and the grandeur of humanity, Michelangelo became more and more focused on Christ's redeeming sacrifice as the years went on. In one of his last poems, he prayed, "My dear Lord, thou alone dost clothe and strip, / And with thy blood purge and heal the souls / From the infinite human sins."

The man and his mission

Michelangelo's personality was as gigantic as his reputation and as complex as his creations. Fiercely independent in his creativity and fiercely loyal in his friendships, he defies the stereotype of the tortured, solitary genius that many have made him out to be. He had an enormous amount of love for a wide circle of friends and a staunch commitment to the welfare his family, financially supporting his aging father, several brothers, a niece, and a nephew.

By the end of his life he had enough money to afford the luxurious lifestyle of other famous artists of the day, but instead he lived like a poor man. Though he rarely accepted gifts, he often gave away artwork to friends and in later years he provided dowries for poor girls otherwise unable to marry.

Ironically, for one who spent his life depicting humanity so exquisitely, he was remarkably careless about his own body. His lifestyle was austere. He drove himself into exhaustion and illness, ate little and slept little. Sometimes he rose in the middle of the night to work, wearing a paper hat with a candle in the middle of it so that he could see while keeping his hands free. He cared little about his clothes and often wore his boots for months at a time, so that when he finally removed them the outer layer of skin came off as well. Michelangelo had his faults, but personal vanity was not one of them.

He did not take kindly to criticism or restrictions on his art. Michelangelo's early biographer Giorgio Vasari relates that when a prudish papal employee complained about the nudity in the unfinished ***Last Judgment***, Michelangelo painted him into the scene as the Prince of Hell. Who ever heard of the dead being raised wearing their clothes?

The artist was never completely satisfied with his own work, however, striving relentlessly toward the ideal that eluded his earthly materials. Vasari wrote, "His imagination was so powerful and perfect that he often discarded work in which his hands found it impossible to express his tremendous and awesome ideas." Michelangelo is recorded as saying, "For those who feel it, nothing makes the soul so religious and pure as the endeavor to create something perfect; for God is perfection, and whoever strives after it, is striving after something divine. True painting is only the image of the perfection of God, a shadow of the pencil with which he paints, a melody, a striving after harmony."

Passionate imagination

In 1547, Paul III appointed the 72-year-old Michelangelo chief architect of the new St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It was one of his last major public commissions and occupied him for much of the remainder of his life, though it would fall to others to finish building what he had planned. The replacement for the old Constantinian basilica had gone through the hands of several popes and designers and foundered in confusion. For the aged master, it was a matter of recovering truth to set things right. He made modifications to a previous architect's design and capped it off with a design for a dome that is today famous around the world.

Michelangelo would accept no payment for the work. He explained, "Because I am old and have nothing else to leave after me, I have not wished to give it up, and also because I serve for the love of God and in Him have all my hope."

As Michelangelo neared the end of his life's journey, echoes of Savonarola's voice can still be heard in one of the artist's last sonnets:

The voyage of my life at last has reached, amidst a stormy sea, in a fragile boat,
the common port where one crosses
to return,
rendering account for every deed wicked
or pious.
So that the passionate imagination
that made art an idol and sovereign to me, I now recognize well how it was laden with error
like all things men desire against
their interests.
What will become of my amorous thoughts, once happy and vain, as two deaths approach
me?
The one I know certainly, the other threatens me.
Neither painting nor sculpture now can calm
the soul turned toward that divine love
that opens his arms on the cross to take us in.

The Colossus of Tuscany worked right up to the end. Though seriously weakened, he was still carving the poignant **Rondanini Pietà** until days before his death on February 18, 1564, less than a month before his 90th birthday. In the hour of his death he desired his friends only to remember the death of Christ.

In the words of the late John W. Dixon, "Michelangelo's faith never wavered. Beyond tragedy, beyond despair, there was always hope, for, in his faith, God himself had taken human despair into himself. What could not be said in words could be shown in the formed image, both the tragic despair and the Way beyond despair. With hope there was the possibility of love. The largeness of his love is something of the measure of his greatness."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 91: Michelangelo: Art for Faith's Sake

Scripture on the Ceiling

Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel make a profound statement about the creation story—and the artist's own creativity.

James Romaine

Every year more than 3,000,000 pilgrims and tourists from around the world flock to the Vatican in Rome and crane their necks to peer upwards at one of the most famous artistic masterpieces in Western culture: the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

From God's creation of the world to Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden to Noah's Ark, Michelangelo's frescoes (art made by painting in wet plaster) are some of the most dramatic and inspiring representations of Genesis ever imagined. Surrounding the nine central scenes that run the length of the chapel are frescoes of Hebrew prophets and ancient seers. In niches and corners between painted columns and arches are even more biblical scenes. In this vast visual drama, Michelangelo presents a storyline of grace foretold through the prophets, incarnate in Christ, and present in the sacraments of the church. His frescoes are a magnificent example of how a Christian artist can interpret Scripture through art.

"The Sistine Chapel is one of the best known, the most studied and the least understood of great works of art," writes John W. Dixon in his book *The Christ of Michelangelo*. In order to understand fully why Michelangelo painted what he did, we need to keep in mind that what has become a temple to art in the minds of tourists and art historians was designed to be a place of worship to God.

For Michelangelo, faith and creativity—liturgy and art—are inseparably linked by a shared power to transform the viewer/worshiper. As Dixon notes, "Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel is participant in the liturgy, an instrument of the liturgy. ... in ways we are only timidly beginning to understand, great paintings shape the imagination of those who participate in them." During the four years he was painting the ceiling, Michelangelo would have been able to observe how the liturgy was practiced in that specific space. He looked for imaginative ways to connect the ceiling frescoes to the worship in the chapel.

The focal point of the Roman Catholic Mass celebrates and reenacts Christ's redeeming sacrifice. Michelangelo was not concerned to show all of the significant scenes from Genesis, but to tell a specific story of divine and human action through creation, fall, and redemption. The fresco cycle depicts the Genesis narrative through the lens of the gospel.

Christ foretold

Michelangelo's designs for the Sistine Chapel ceiling were the conclusion of a chapel decoration campaign that had spanned 35 years. When Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to decorate the ceiling, the pope suggested frescoes of the twelve apostles. But Michelangelo conceived a much grander program and later wrote in a letter that the pope "gave me a new commission to do whatever I wished." Fully grounded in Renaissance concepts of art, theology, and philosophy, and with access to the pope's own theological advisors, Michelangelo designed a series of frescoes depicting the Genesis narrative as an epic history of divine action.

His ceiling frescoes complemented (and surpassed) two older fresco cycles on the chapel's north and south walls painted by other artists—one on the life of Christ and the other on the life of Moses. This

parallelism between the Old and New Testament set a precedent for Michelangelo to represent the Genesis creation narrative as a foretelling of the New Testament and the worship of the church.

Michelangelo framed his nine central scenes, which portray key moments in the book of Genesis, with a company of witnesses composed of Old Testament prophets and classical sibyls (prophetesses). These are the Jewish and Gentile seers who anticipated Christ. The Hebrew prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah to Israel. The pagan sibyls, according to the early church father Augustine, also received glimpses of truth that prepared the way for Christ within the Gentile world. The idea that God would work through both Jewish and non-Jewish, biblical and non-biblical, people was in harmony with Renaissance humanist theology, which attempted to unite Christian doctrine with the philosophy of classical antiquity.

As they get closer to the altar, the figures of the male prophets and female sibyls increase in size until they are nearly spilling out of their niches—only the graceful precision of Michelangelo's line holds their forms in check. Their postures show anticipation as they ponder the grace that lies ahead. These figures not only frame the Genesis narrative visually, but they also act as historical and conceptual bridges from creation to Christ, linking the Genesis scenes to the rest of the chapel.

Alternating between the prophets and sibyls are the ancestors of Christ recorded in the first chapter of Matthew. They represent Christ's human lineage from Abraham and form yet another bridge to the Genesis story.

Emanating grace

The nine scenes that run the chapel's length—*The Separation of Light and Darkness*, *The Creation of Land and Vegetation* and *The Creation of the Sun and Moon*, *The Bringing Forth of Life from the Waters*, *The Creation of Adam*, *The Creation of Eve*, *The Temptation and Expulsion*, *The Faithfulness of Noah*, *The Flood*, and *The Drunkenness of Noah*—are thematically grouped into three triads. The first triad, nearest the altar, portrays God's creative character as he shapes the universe out of nothingness. In these scenes, God the Father is the central protagonist. The second three scenes show how humans were created for a perfect relationship with God and how they broke that relationship. Several images, such as the cross-like tree in *The Temptation and Expulsion*, foreshadow Christ's passion. The final triad depicts the faithfulness, deliverance, and transgression of Noah. These scenes demonstrate how the Holy Spirit, symbolically present as the dove, supported Noah's life and faith. The entire sequence is thus deeply Trinitarian, showing God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the universe.

Michelangelo's intention of using the Genesis narrative to prefigure Christ, the redeemer of creation, may explain why he chose to represent such lesser known subjects as Noah's sacrifice (in *The Faithfulness of Noah*) and not more popular or dramatic scenes such as Cain's murder of Abel and the Tower of Babel. Each of the nine central scenes that span the ceiling makes symbolic reference to Christ's death and/or resurrection. Additional scenes in the corners—such as David defeating Goliath or Moses raising up the brazen serpent—explicitly connect the theme of sacrifice and salvation to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ celebrated at the altar below.

The order of Michelangelo's frescoes is also significant. As a worshiper walks into the chapel, he passes the Genesis scenes in reverse chronological order, entering directly below *The Drunkenness of Noah*. In this image, Noah's shame is being covered over, just as the sins of humanity can be covered over by the death of Christ. Michelangelo seems to suggest that we must approach God naked, in full awareness of our shame, and seeking his covering.

The altar is below the cycle's "eternal" end, from which the dynamic and transforming power of creation emanates. As the priest holds up the bread at the pivotal point in the service, enacting the mystery of

transubstantiation according to Catholic doctrine, he sees above him the image of God initiating the mystery of creation. The placement of ***The Separation of Light and Darkness*** over the altar connects that moment to creation's ultimate completion in Christ's struggle and triumph over darkness and death. It also impresses on us the fact that God's purposes for salvation and the church were part of his plan at the beginning of the world.

The prophets, sibyls, ancestors, and other figures surrounding the ceiling are visually and theologically connected to the nine central scenes by the illusion of a single light source—not the natural light from the windows along the chapel's side walls—emanating from the scene of God separating the light from the darkness directly above the altar. This light not only unifies the entire ceiling, it also symbolizes how the light of God that now flows out of the church and its sacraments connects Jew and Gentile, East and West, man and woman—all who live in the light of the gospel.

As Christ's redeeming sacrifice is celebrated during the service, the present grace represented in the Eucharist and the eternal reality of God's acts represented above in Michelangelo's art become one chorus of worship.

The image of God

Michelangelo's ***Creation of Adam*** is one of the most famous and theologically complex images in the history of art. Adam, the most spectacular of God's creations, has been wonderfully formed, but his limp body still stretches across the earth from which it was made. God is about to give Adam the final touch of life. This will cause Adam to stand up, setting him apart from the material out of which he was made and from the rest of creation.

In keeping with the foreshadowing theme, Adam prefigures Christ, the second Adam. Just as Adam was the first man created and raised to life from the earth, Christ was the first man resurrected from the tomb in a restored relationship with God. All those who worship in the Sistine Chapel find themselves between these two creative acts. Adam's body is almost completely enveloped by the earth; this reminds us that we were formed from the earth and will return to it, where we will wait to be resurrected at the Last Judgment. Michelangelo, who probably did not foresee being called back to the Sistine Chapel 24 years later to paint ***The Last Judgment*** on the altar wall, made his ***Creation of Adam*** a picture of humanity's origin and end.

There is something unusual about ***The Creation of Adam***, however: Adam appears to be alive ***before*** God has endowed him with life. If he already has a living body, what is he about to receive from God? This problem has troubled many scholars, but it is possible that Michelangelo was very consciously ***not*** depicting the physical creation of Adam in order to evoke a profound theological question: What does it mean to be created "in the image of God"?

Michelangelo's representations of the human figure are so brilliant that they can distract us from the artist's underlying purpose. Adam has the perfect human form, but is it his physical beauty alone that shows that he is created in the image of God? Though the artist is symbolically portraying God in human form, it would be wrong to think Michelangelo believed God, the Father, had a physical body. He avoids the theological blunder that Adam was created to ***look*** like God. The image of God is spiritual and creative, not physical. Therefore, instead of showing the moment when God forms Adam's body out of the dirt, Michelangelo shows God giving Adam the spirit of his creativity. Adam receives this gift with an expression of adoration. God creates man, before the fall, not as a toiler but as a creative being.

In this masterpiece, Michelangelo is doing more than representing the moment of creation. He is employing his own creativity as a means of studying God's creative nature. If our creative capacity is a part of the image of God in us, then exploring and exercising our creativity can be a means of better knowing him. Art-making can be a form of visual theology. The Genesis narrative attracted Michelangelo

because it resonated with him as a Christian and an artist. It laid out a biblical, Trinitarian understanding of creativity that he found necessary to his art.

Through his composition and forms, Michelangelo conveys a reciprocal love and longing between God and Adam as they reach for each other. The Bible describes God breathing into Adam to give him life; we ourselves are breathless in anticipation of their touch.

By causing us to anticipate God's touch, which will awaken Adam's creativity and make him more fully human, Michelangelo arouses those same qualities in us and inspires us to a more creative, dynamic, and living faith. And in exercising his own massive artistic gifts, Michelangelo brings the theme of divine grace, foretold and fulfilled from the very first moments of creation, into the present moment of the church's worship.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 91: Michelangelo: Art for Faith's Sake

The Stones Will Cry Out

The theme of Christ's death followed Michelangelo through his whole life.

Jill Carrington

Beauty and goodness, and grief and pity, alive in the dead marble," began a poem by one spectator awestruck by Michelangelo's earliest masterpiece: the marble *Pietà* that now stands in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The term *pietà* (meaning both "pity" and "piety") is used to describe works of art picturing the dead Christ held by his mother after he has been taken down from the cross. In Michelangelo's sculpture (c. 1497-1500), Mary cradles the body of her son in her lap. The work shows a breathtaking level of skill for a 25-year-old artist and emulates the delicate beauty and utter calm of ancient Greek and Roman statues. Influenced in his youth by the humanist circle around Lorenzo de' Medici, Michelangelo came to believe that art should not merely copy reality but strive for the ideal.

The quiet beauty of the *Pietà* has Christian significance as well. When contemporaries described the *Pietà* as "perfect," they were making a theological statement, which Michelangelo shared: Christ's outward physical perfection mirrors his inner spiritual perfection as the Son of God. There is no blood evident, and Christ's wounds are barely visible. His calm beauty points away from his suffering and death and toward his ultimate victory.

Decades after carving the St. Peter's sculpture, when he was in his 60s, Michelangelo returned to the image of the dead Christ in drawings and sculptures. He continued to explore this theme until his death. The *St. Peter's Pietà* was a public work commissioned by a French cardinal. But the later *Pietà*s and related drawings were private, highly personal creations bound up with the artist's deep belief in Christ's gift of salvation to those who have faith. They also reveal his awareness of his own sin and imperfection and his longing for redemption.

The impetus for Michelangelo's return to the image of the dead Christ was the strengthening of his faith in the 1530s, nourished by his friendship with Vittoria Colonna. Around 1540, Michelangelo presented Colonna with an elaborate graphite drawing of a *Pietà* group. In the *St. Peter's Pietà*, the position of Christ in Mary's lap had focused devotional attention on Mary. In the drawing for Colonna, the focus is on the upright Christ offering himself for the sin of humanity. His body is wedged between his mother's legs while her arms are raised in prayer. His love, humility, and grace have overwhelmed her, and she knows that her son will live again and redeem the world. Her faith symbolizes that of all believers.

On the cross is written a verse from Dante's *Paradiso*: "They think not how much blood it cost." In Dante's poem the blood refers to the efforts of preachers and martyrs to spread the gospel, but for Michelangelo it echoes the Catholic reformers' message that salvation comes from Christ. The word *cost*, as historian Alexander Nagel has observed, also reminds the viewer of the free yet priceless gift of Christ's grace, in contrast to the prevailing system in which prayers, indulgences, and other good works counted toward salvation.

The faith of Nicodemus

Around 1547 or 1548, while he was in Rome, Michelangelo began carving a marble *Pietà* that he intended for his own tomb. (It now stands in the Museum of Cathedral Works in Florence.) Though a

personal work, it was the most ambitious single sculpture he ever attempted, consisting of four more-than-life-size figures: Christ in the center, his mother Mary to the right, Mary Magdalene to the left, and Nicodemus above. Christ's twisted pose intensifies the love that flows between him and the mourners. Mary's eyes are closed, and her head is joined with her son's. Mary Magdalene is embraced by Christ's right arm.

Perhaps the most intriguing figure is Nicodemus, whose bearded face Michelangelo modeled on his own. According to legend, Nicodemus was a sculptor, and therefore Renaissance sculptors sometimes portrayed themselves as Nicodemus. Michelangelo's belief in salvation by faith also closely followed Christ's teaching to Nicodemus about faith and eternal life in John 3:1-21.

As Nagel has pointed out, Michelangelo deliberately gave the Nicodemus figure a unifying role in the sculpture: With one hand he holds the arm of Christ that embraces the repentant sinner Mary Magdalene, with the other he presses the Virgin Mary against her son, while he himself bends forward over all the figures. Michelangelo is both Nicodemus, physically holding the group together and helping to convey Christ's gift to humanity, and the sculptor, laboring to convey the mystery of grace.

Michelangelo had wanted this piece to be the crowning statement of his art and his faith. But after eight years of working on the sculpture, he gave up and attacked it with a hammer, breaking both of Christ's arms and his left leg. (Michelangelo's pupil, Tiberio Calcagni, later restored the detached parts, except for the leg, which is now missing, and carved the rest of Mary Magdalene.) Michelangelo claimed that a servant's persistent nagging to finish it, along with several mishaps (a piece breaking off of Mary's arm, the discovery of a crack in the marble), made him hate the work. If another servant had not persuaded him to give the sculpture away, he would have smashed the entire thing.

There may have been another reason why Michelangelo disliked the work. Vasari later described a nocturnal visit to Michelangelo's workshop when his "eyes wandered to the leg of Christ on which he [Michelangelo] was working and attempting to alter, and in order that Vasari might not see it, he let the lantern fall and they were in the dark." The leg was originally slung over the Virgin Mary's thigh, a gesture that symbolized marriage between deities in classical art. Michelangelo was trying to use the love between Christ and Mary to symbolize the mystical union of Christ and the church. But in this case, the challenge of reinvigorating a traditional religious subject with elements from classical art threatened to defeat him. He broke the sculpture, possibly because he feared the erotic implication of the slung leg. Never again, in his drawings or sculptures, did he show Christ in Mary's lap or between her legs.

Michelangelo left many of his works unfinished, especially as he grew older. Partly, this was because he began to realize that the ideal beauty to which he aspired would always surpass the limitations of the material and his skill to shape it. One historian, Paul Barolsky, has suggested that the artist felt himself to be, like his sculptures, unfinished—sinful, in need of reform.

Beyond the stone

When Michelangelo was in his 80s, he began what is known as the *Rondanini Pietà* (now in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan). A pupil reported that Michelangelo was working on the *Pietà*, or another sculpture of the same subject, six days before his death in 1564. As in the case of the *Florence Pietà*, he made the sculpture for himself, though his purpose is unknown. In this work, more than in any of his others, Michelangelo abandoned physical realism and Renaissance artistic principles, carving a simplified conception of Christ's sacrifice.

He may have come up with the initial idea for this sculpture even before he destroyed the *Florence Pietà* in 1555 and started a first version that he later radically reworked. Only the right arm of Christ remains from the original version, connected to the present version by a thin marble bridge. We don't know why Michelangelo left this muscular arm when he could have removed it. Whatever the reason, its

presence emphasizes the stark contrast between the style of his earlier work and the rough anti-physicality of the final sculpture.

Michelangelo chose to severely truncate the block of marble after he had partially carved the first version, leaving only a thin, curved piece of stone. Mary stands above and behind her delicate, almost weightless son. She no longer supports him; his shoulder is pressed against her chest. The sense of human drama articulated by gesture and movement is gone. The starkly fused figures still convey Christ's intense love for humankind, but in the simplest terms, without the nuances of earlier *Pietàs*.

Neither Michelangelo nor his earliest biographers gave any explanations of this work, and historians have interpreted it in many different ways. In a sense, the *Rondanini Pietà* continues his quest for the ideal beyond mere physical reality that he began with early works such as the *St. Peter's Pietà*. "Lofty, soaring, erect, the recarved group suggests less a Pietà than a Resurrection, the ultimate Christian victory," writes Frederick Hartt. "The subject of the Resurrection ... has infused the spectacle of sacrificial death with the promise of the hereafter."

In his *Pietàs*, Michelangelo traveled the road from public commissions to personal creations, from works that were highly polished to ones that were unfinished, mutilated, and simplified, from idealized beauty to barely articulated form. Given the religious and artistic divisions in 16th-century Italy, he experimented in private, struggling to find ways of expressing artistically his conviction that what ultimately matters is Christ's gracious offer of salvation. He abandoned conventional visual language completely in the *Rondanini Pietà*, his final work. But to the end of his days, his faith in Christ's sacrifice and redemption demanded that he wrestle with stone to bring dead marble to life.

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Michelangelo: Christian History Timeline

The Life of Michelangelo

1475 Born in Caprese on March 6; family moves back to Florence, following the short stay in Caprese

1481 Mother dies in Florence

1485 Enters grammar school taught by humanist Francesco da Urbino

1488 Apprenticed in a painter's workshop run by the Gbirlandaio brothers

1490 Decides to pursue sculpture and begins work in the Medici Gardens

1494 Leaves Florence before the expulsion of the Medici and eventually ends up in Rome in 1496

1499 Completes the *St. Peter's Pietà*, which establishes his reputation in Rome

1501 Returns to Florence and receives commission to sculpt the *David*, which he completes in 1504

1504 Paints the *Doni Tondo*

1505 Back in Rome, he begins work on Julius U's tomb

1508- 1512 Paints the Sistine Chapel ceiling

1519 Begins designing the Medici Chapel in Florence

1524 Commissioned to design the Laurentian Library in Florence

1527-1530 Builds fortifications for the Florentine republic

1532 Meets Tommaso Cavalieri

1535 Pope Paul III commissions Michelangelo to paint the *Last Judgment*; Michelangelo meets Vittoria Colonna; gives "presentation drawings" to Colonna and other friends

1541 *Last Judgment is unveiled*

1546-1550 Paints the Pauline Chapel frescoes (*The Crucifixion of Peter and The Conversion of Paul*)

1547 Vittoria Colonna dies; Michelangelo is appointed chief architect of the new St. Peter's Basilica; begins the *Florence Pietà* that includes Nicodemus

1553 Ascanio Condivi publishes *Life of Michelangelo*

1560s Sculpting the *Rondanini Pietà*

1564 Dies on February 18 at age 89

The World of the Renaissance

1425 Masaccio paints *The Trinity*

1436 -1442 Fra Angelico paints *Annunciation* frescoes at San Marco

1438-1445 Council of Florence pursues unity with Greek Orthodox Church but ultimately fails

1446-1450 Gutenberg invents movable type

1473 Construction of the Sistine Chapel begins under Pope Sixtus IV

1480 -1482 Girolamo Savonarola begins preaching in Florence

1486-1495 Josquin des Prez, Martin Luther's favorite composer, is writing masses in Rome

1490 Botticelli paints Lamentation *Over the Dead Christ*

1491 Savonarola becomes prior of San Marco

1492 Columbus arrives in America; Lorenzo de' Medici dies

1494 French invade Italy; Medici lose control of Florence; Savonarola leads the first republic in Florence

1495 Leonardo da Vinci paints the *Last Supper*

1496 Savonarola excommunicated by Pope Alexander VI

1498 Savonarola burned as a heretic

1503-1506 Leonardo da Vinci paints the *Mona Lisa*

1507 Pope, Julius II sells indulgences to fund new St. Peter's Basilica, a practice his successor Leo X continues

1510 Raphael begins the *School of Athens*

1512 Medici regain power in Florence

1513 Machiavelli writes *The Prince* and publishes it in 1532

1516 Erasmus publishes the Greek New Testament; Thomas More publishes Utopia 1517 Martin Luther posts his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg

1519 Charles of Spain elected Holy Roman Emperor

1521 Martin Luther excommunicated by Pope Leo X

1522 Spanish ship led by Magellan completes voyage around the world

1527 Sack of Rome by the troops of Emperor Charles V; Medici are again exiled from Florence; the last republic in Florence begins

1529-1530 Charles V and Pope Clement VII join forces to besiege Florence

1534 English Parliament separates the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church

1536 John Calvin publishes *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; English reformer William Tyndale is burnt at the stake

1540 Society of Jesus(Jesuits) founded

1542 Roman Inquisition

1543 Copernicus writes *On the Revolution of Celestial Bodies*

1545-1563 Council of Trent convenes to reform the Catholic church

1549 Cardinal Reginald Pole loses papal election; Giovanni Maria Ciocchi del Monte becomes Pope Julius III

1550 Giorgio Vasari publishes *Lives of the Painters*

1552 Palestrina, a composer famous for his use of polyphony, dedicates his first compositions to Pope Julius III

1555 Peace of Augsburg officially recognizes Lutheranism in Germany

1557 Pope Paul IV introduces the Index of Prohibited Books

1562 French wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants begin

1564 William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England; Galileo is born in Pisa, Italy

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The Art of Grace

Justification by faith, in living color.

Thomas F. Mayer

Saul struck blind on the road to Damascus. Peter in the act of being crucified. These scenes—the last frescoes Michelangelo ever painted—face one another on the walls of the pope's private chapel in the Vatican. Michelangelo was still working on them in late 1549 when the chapel became the site of one of the most important papal elections in the history of Christianity.

At stake was the soul of the Western church: Would it remain in one piece, or would the divisions that had been tearing at its unity for a generation lead to a permanent rupture? Michelangelo's friend Reginald Pole—nemesi s of Henry VIII and later Mary Tudor's archbishop of Canterbury—led in the voting throughout most of the election. He stood for a more personal, inward version of Christianity than many of his peers in Rome and sympathized with the almost unprecedented religious openness of this period. Above all, he was thought likely to seek an immediate understanding with the increasingly Protestant parts of Europe, especially Luther's Germany.

The cardinals debated the future of the papacy for over two months within the embrace of a profound artistic message. Michelangelo had designed *The Crucifixion of Peter* and *The Conversion of Paul* so that when the pope turned toward the assembly in the chapel while celebrating the Eucharist, the gaze of the soon-to-be-martyred Peter struck him full in the face. A quick glance away brought the pope into confrontation with the stricken Paul, whose temporarily blind eyes directed attention upward to Christ, the source of Paul's, Peter's, and the church's authority. Both frescoes graphically illustrated the pope's absolute dependence on God. The papacy's outward majesty and power were nowhere in evidence. This was exactly the view that Pole developed during the election, concluding that the pope should model himself after the crucified Christ. Since Pole also refused to campaign, arguing that anyone who did automatically made himself unworthy of the office, he had a radically different understanding of the papacy than any of his immediate predecessors.

These two frescoes have often been criticized as the efforts of a failing artist no longer capable of the magnificent work he had done in the adjoining Sistine Chapel. Seen in their proper context, however, they were in fact part of Michelangelo's last testament, along with the *Rondanini Pietà*. The views that Pole theorized in writing and Michelangelo painted were shared with their bosom companion, Vittoria Colonna. Before she died in 1547, the three had known each other for almost 15 years. Their common, highly personal faith represented a broad and deep challenge to the current state of the institutional church in favor of a return to a simpler, purer version of New Testament Christianity.

Reform is in the air

It was one of the most tumultuous periods in Christian history. A principal cause was the state of the papacy. Once the arbiter of Christendom, it had suffered a serious decline in prestige. Since the 13th century, the papacy had gained an enviable position of authority (and sometimes power) by promising Europeans that they could bring any and all problems to Rome and the pope would solve them. This promise proved wildly popular but difficult to keep—and, by the late 15th and early 16th centuries, impossible.

After the French invasion of Italy in 1494, the popes struggled under increasing political and religious

pressures. Not least among these was the movement of renewal launched in Florence by Girolamo Savonarola. Savonarola believed that the Apocalypse was rapidly approaching, and that the Antichrist was the pope. He preached the importance of inner faith, as well as the necessity of restoring the republic in Florence.

Savonarola is only one example of a climate of radical religious experimentation not seen since perhaps the 12th century. The most well known of these experimenters today is Martin Luther, who insisted that ordinary believers could be saved through faith in God's grace, which they could know by reading the Bible. But these ideas were not unique to Luther. They had much in common with a broad spectrum of Christian thought in the late Middle Ages derived more or less directly from the letters of Paul, often read (as Luther did) through the lens of the early church father Augustine.

The popes were slow to respond to these challenges. On the one hand, they saw Luther as just another apostate monk, and on the other hand, they failed to recognize the potential in the religious renewal going on in their immediate vicinity. As a result, they lost some of their ability to provide central direction and provoked serious questions about prevailing notions of authority. But under the leadership of Pope Paul III, the foundations of what is sometimes called the "Catholic Reformation" began to be built. Paul III appointed reform-minded people like Pole as cardinals and called the Council of Trent, which met intermittently from 1545 to 1563 to discuss the need for reform and to formulate a response to the Protestant challenge.

The free gift of grace

As external institutions seemed near collapse, Michelangelo's faith grew more and more inward-focused. He used his art—whether painting, sculpture, drawing, or poetry—to recover an understanding of Christianity rooted in the believer's own experience.

Following the apostle Paul, Michelangelo conceived of salvation as entirely dependent on God's grace. The believer's best efforts, even a believer as driven as he was, could contribute nothing: "all my efforts apart from your blood do not make a man blessed" he wrote in a poem. Outward rituals and observances do not save, although it is unclear how much of a role Michelangelo and his like-minded friends saved for the sacraments. They all sought a deeper relationship with Christ that became almost mystical.

Like Savonarola, whose hymns were kept alive in Dominican nunneries in Tuscany long after his execution as a heretic, Michelangelo and Colonna wrote poetry as a form of intensely personal prayer. They may never have quite reached the apocalyptic urgency of Savonarola's "O soul, by sin made blind" with its refrain "Alas, alas, alas, fear of the Lord is dead in us," but all three shared the solution put forward in the hymn's final stanza: "Go back to Jesus Christ—and to His Mother dear." While Colonna, like Savonarola, probably never lost her devotion to Mary as mediator, by the mid-1540s Michelangelo zeroed in on Christ's grace. As he put it in a sonnet probably from 1547:

My dear Lord, I call and appeal to you alone
against my blind torment
You alone can renew me, within and without ...
Without you, Lord, I lack every good

Or this, probably from the last decade of his life:

The thorns and nails of both your palms
with your benign, humble and merciful face,
promise the grace of repenting much
and hope of salvation to my sad soul ...

May your blood wash and cleanse my sins,
and the older I grow, the more may it abound
with prompt help and complete pardon.

Michelangelo expressed his point in the language of the unconditional gift, both real and metaphorical. At first, Colonna had trouble grasping the concept that "grace cannot be bought" (as Michelangelo wrote in a letter). When words literally failed him, Michelangelo turned to the more congenial medium of art. He invented for her the "presentation drawing," a drawing intended to be finished and given to someone rather than used as a model for another work of art, as was usually done. Through their subjects, Christ crucified and the *Pietà*, as well as his refusal to accept anything in return, Michelangelo **showed** Colonna the unconditional nature of Christ's gift. Colonna at first tried to reciprocate by presenting him with manuscripts of her poetry or asking for copies of his work for others, completely misunderstanding his purpose. Eventually she understood his point so well that she could convert it into words in "The Lament on Christ's Passion," stating that the gift of grace through Christ's suffering and death was the only means of salvation.

These beliefs were summarized in the poetic, Christ-centered language of the most important work of the Catholic Reformation in Italy, the *Benefit of Christ's Death* (1543). Its final form was produced under Pole's direction by another poet and his intimate friend, Marcantonio Flaminio. Colonna, whom Pole called his "second mother," was with both of them during the writing. The book's main point was put in simple, biblical-sounding language at the end: "But blessed is he who imitates St. Paul, renounces all his own justification, and wants no other justice than that of Christ." The book frequently calls this "benefit" a gift, just as Michelangelo and Colonna did.

Judgment

The similarity of these beliefs to Protestant tendencies did not go unnoticed. From the safety of Geneva, the reformer John Calvin challenged those in papal territories with similar views to throw off the mask of conformity to Catholic authority and profess their convictions openly. He addressed this appeal to "Nicodemites," an allusion to Nicodemus who had wished to follow Jesus but refused to visit him except by night. Calvin may have touched a nerve with his accusation, especially if it is true that Michelangelo represented himself as Nicodemus in the *Florence Pietà*.

Calvin and many other Protestants viewed reform as necessarily having a public component. But for Michelangelo it was a more internal matter of personal renewal, expressed in private poetry shared only with his closest friends and in art such as the frescoes of Paul and Peter that few people ever got to see. More observers were exposed to Michelangelo's most notorious painting, *The Last Judgment*, especially his fellow artists who flocked to see it. But Michelangelo coded its message in such a way that most of its meaning is still disputed. In this painting, everyone stands equally before the judgment seat. Even Peter, diffidently returning his keys to Christ, seems uncertain whether he will be accepted into heaven. All is in motion, all is entirely dependent on Christ's command, represented by his upraised right arm. No one could know whether they were saved, but they could rest secure in Christ's promise of grace.

Ironically, the most conservative Roman Catholics saw eye to eye with Calvin on the danger Michelangelo and his friends posed in their rejection (or at least avoidance) of doctrinal authority and the necessity of institutions. At this point in time, there was a wide range of theological options. The division between "Catholic" and "Protestant" did not yet even come close to being black and white. But that was starting to change.

"Make the world a suitable place"

Throughout the papal election in 1549, Cardinal Reginald Pole was the favorite candidate. But he lost—

by one vote. A marvelous opportunity for unity was missed, and shortly thereafter the ruptures between Catholic and Protestant did indeed become permanent.

It was not until 1563, a year before Michelangelo's death, that the Council of Trent finally concluded its work, leaving behind its official doctrinal definitions that the church had never had before. Among these was justification as a matter of faith *and* works, of private belief *and* public action. The *Benefit* was put on the Index of Prohibited Books, and some of Michelangelo's most high-profile work came under severe criticism, including censorship in the form of repainting.

This especially befell *The Last Judgment*, in large part because of its nudity. Paul IV (who had been the first head of the 1542 Roman Inquisition before he became pope) even proposed to destroy the painting, masking his objections in architectural, not religious terms—the Sistine Chapel was too small for the increasing number of cardinals. It also suffered from Trent's new insistence that religious art correspond with literal reality and that its ideas be clearly understandable. Faced with Paul's hostile demand that Michelangelo make his work "suitable," Michelangelo replied with a pithy summary of his attitude as a Christian artist: "Tell the pope that this is a small matter and it can easily be made suitable; let him make the world a suitable place and painting will follow suit."

Interestingly enough, the Pauline frescoes did not attract this kind of criticism, perhaps because they were insufficiently well known. But that popes of the counter-reforming rigor of Pius V (1560-1572) found nothing objectionable in them suggests that Michelangelo had touched a very deep chord at the papacy's heart.

By Pius's time, public expression of views like Michelangelo's became imprudent. Nevertheless, Michelangelo himself remained an almost untouchable icon. He had invented a new role, the artist-creator, free to do whatever he or she wished, in whatever domain, unhampered by any constraints other than the limits of his or her genius. Michelangelo's art was a tremendous contribution to the history of Christianity that survived and flourished precisely because it could be read in so many ways.

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And the dead shall be raised.

The theme of salvation by grace runs throughout the complicated content of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, commissioned by Pope Paul III. The massive fresco is filled with dozens of mostly nude figures. The redeemed ascend to heaven as the damned are dragged into hell. The focus is on the "one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5) through whom comes salvation.

Georgio Vasari says the gigantic wall painting filled viewers with awe when it was unveiled in 1541. But it also sparked criticism. Some thought the nudity unseemly and better suited to a bathhouse than a chapel. After the Council of Trent imposed restrictions on art, one of Michelangelo's former pupils painted patches of cloth over the offending parts of the human anatomy. But for Michelangelo, unclothed figures belonged in a resurrection scene: He did not believe in a nebulous immortality of the soul. This is the resurrection of the body. Before our Maker and Judge we stand stripped of all that covers us in this world.

Michelangelo did not exclude himself from this but portrayed his own face in the stripped skin held in the hand of St. Bartholomew, who according to tradition was martyred by being flayed. The limp, withering skin hangs under the gaze of Christ on the axis between heaven and hell, facing the possibility of salvation or condemnation. The image evokes Job: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last day he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God."

—Laurel Gasque

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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A Renaissance Gallery

Five artists who captured the imagination of the church

Rachel Smith

The optimism and confidence in human potential that characterized the Renaissance produced an extraordinary number of exceptional artists. The painters showcased here reveal key aspects of the development of Renaissance art. Each was informed by the Christian faith that undergirded their society, and each, in turn, shaped the Christian tradition for centuries to follow.

Masaccio

(1401-c.1428)

His name may not be known to most people today, yet little more than a century after the painter Masaccio's death, the 16th-century biographer Giorgio Vasari identified him as a key figure in the history of Renaissance art, writing that "he gave birth to that modern style which has been followed from those [Masaccio's] times down to our own day by all our artists."

Masaccio rejected the artistic conventions of grace and idealized beauty for sacred subjects in favor of representations that were, in the words of Vasari, "lifelike, true, and natural." He wanted to make the Christian faith more tangible and accessible to the common person. Like many Renaissance artists, he painted grand human dramas that emphasized the dignity of humankind. His skillful use of simple forms, colorful figures with emphatic gestures and expressive faces, three-dimensional perspective, and shadows made his subjects seem almost palpable. In his famous fresco depicting the Trinity in Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Masaccio employed many of these techniques to portray the central mystery of the Christian faith—the one God who is three persons.

Though Masaccio's rough, natural style went against prevailing tastes in his time, he had an enormous influence on later Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael. Not a shabby legacy for someone who died before his 28th birthday.

Fra Angelico

(active c. 1418-55)

There is perhaps no Renaissance artist whose art so closely reflects his personal character as the painter known to us as Fra Angelico. Described as "simple and most holy," "humane and temperate, living chastely," he claimed "that anyone who created works involving Christ ought always to reside with Christ." Vasari tells us that "although he could have lived most comfortably in the secular world ... and could have earned whatever he wanted from the arts ... he nevertheless desired, for his own satisfaction and tranquility (being by nature calm and gentle) and, principally, for the salvation of his soul, to join the Order of the Preaching Friars," that is, the Dominicans. In 1449 he was elected prior of the Monastery of San Marco in Florence, which he had decorated with frescoes in service of the Order some years earlier.

From early on, recognition of his moral character and devotional piety rivaled his reputation as a painter. He even turned down an invitation by the pope to be archbishop of Florence, claiming that he did not feel well suited to such a leadership position. Long before his death, he was referred to simply as Fra Angelico, the Angelic Brother.

Fra Angelico saw his painting as a devotional exercise. It was said that he "never set his hand to a brush without first saying a prayer. He never painted a crucifix without the tears streaming down his cheeks." But more importantly, he also saw his paintings as being far more than mere representations of sacred subjects. Their primary purpose, to borrow the words of the 15th-century architect and art theorist Leon Battista Alberti, was "to move the soul of the beholder." Renaissance Christians viewed religious images not only as a valuable means of teaching biblical stories and doctrines (as advocated by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century), but as having a spiritually transformative power.

Fra Angelico's many paintings of the Annunciation to Mary bear witness to his deep interest in the mystery of the Incarnation. He clearly follows the teaching of Saint Antoninus, archbishop of Florence, who wrote that in submitting to God's mysterious plan Mary models perfectly the attitude that a monk or believer should have: "piety is ... expecting blessedness and the coming of the great divine glory." So too, concludes Antoninus, the Word may be incarnated in the believer so that the "light of devotion" will radiate within him.

Several of Angelico's Annunciation scenes depict the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden in the background of the main scene, clearly relating the coming of Christ to its cause—the need to redeem humankind. As Antoninus also taught, "death will be destroyed by death and birth repaired by birth." Like many scenes of the Annunciation during the Renaissance, a column visually separates Mary from Gabriel, standing in for Christ. It reminds us that by becoming a man, Christ bridged the great divide between God and humanity. The column also foreshadows his suffering when he was bound to a column (according to tradition) and whipped before embarking on the path to Gethsemane.

Characterized by luminous color, clear light, pure forms, serene expressions, and a supreme calm, Angelico's paintings exude a devotional attitude that has seldom been matched. Their beauty is even more remarkable if, as Vasari claimed, "It was his habit never to retouch or to redo any of his paintings but, rather, always to leave them just as they had turned out the first time, since he believed (according to what he said) that this was God's will."

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510)

In the time of Lorenzo de' Medici, ... truly a golden age for men of talent, there flourished an artist named Alessandro, shortened to Sandro according to our custom, with the second name of Botticelli," begins Vasari's *Life of Sandro Botticelli*. In contrast with the monumental human dramas of Masaccio and Michelangelo, Botticelli represents a poetic current in Renaissance art that appealed especially to the wealthy ruling elites of the time. He had a distinctive painting style characterized by a strong decorative appeal, learned from his apprentice days in a goldsmith's shop and as an assistant to the painter Fra Filippo Lippi.

The tapestry-like *Primavera* (Spring) and *The Birth of Venus*, perhaps his two most popular and widely reproduced paintings, reflect the concern for reconciling classical philosophy with Christian theology among the humanists who dominated the court of Lorenzo de' Medici. For instance, the chaste, robed goddess Venus at the center of *Primavera* could just as easily be interpreted as Mary, the mother of Jesus, both of whom were seen as symbols of love and societal nurture in the Renaissance.

Intelligent and genial, Botticelli could move equally well among the most erudite court circles or the young apprentices in his workshop. He had a reputation as a prankster who loved nothing better than to play practical jokes on his friends and assistants. This makes the question of his response to the charismatic Dominican reformer Savonarola all the more intriguing.

Savonarola's fiery preaching called for the cleansing and renewal of both the church and Florentine

society and drew followers from all walks of life, including one of Botticelli's brothers. Botticelli himself has been identified as one of Savonarola's *piagnoni* ("weepers" or "snivelers" as they were derisively called by opponents) in some sources. According to one story, the painter was so affected by Savonarola's preaching that he burned many of his "worldly" paintings and turned more toward religious subjects. Some have assumed, therefore, that he was an ardent follower of Savonarola who had experienced a profound conversion.

We don't know for sure whether these claims are true or what his personal convictions actually were. We do know that Botticelli's work took on a different tone after Savonarola's arrival in Florence. More somber in both subject and treatment, the paintings of the 1490s seem to reflect the growing tensions in Florentine society that arose, at least in part, from Savonarola's railing against both personal sin and institutional corruption. For example, the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c. 1490-92), a kind of *pietà*, retains the lyrical grace characteristic of Botticelli's earlier paintings—as seen in the arched body of Christ. But it also exhibits an intensity and pathos (in the grieving women, for example) not present in his paintings before.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

No person exemplifies the concept of the "Renaissance Man" better than Leonardo. Music, drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, town planning, optics, and aviation; hydraulic, military, structural, and mechanical engineering; anatomy, biology, zoology, botany, geology, geography, astronomy, and mathematics—the list of his interests and areas of endeavor goes on and on. In an age of high achievements and even higher aspirations, Leonardo stood apart, in a class by himself.

But there was a cost to Leonardo's genius. His prodigious talent and restless mind kept him from focusing his energy on any one thing for very long. His perfectionism caused him to seldom see a project as done, frequently frustrating his patrons with his endless tinkering. "Impatience, the mother of stupidity, praises brevity," he claimed. His experimentation with new materials and techniques frequently had disastrous results. The paint from one mural literally slid down the wall as it was being painted, and the *Last Supper* began to show almost immediate decay for reasons that still remain something of a puzzle. For a man whose completed works can be counted on two hands, it is remarkable that he is first and foremost remembered as an artist.

In spite of all of the ink that has been spilled in an effort to explain him, he continues to intrigue and confound understanding. Idiosyncrasies like his practice of employing mirror writing (writing backwards from right to left) for his notes have given rise to wild speculations about the reason for his desired "secrecy" and, for the credulous, make all kinds of unfounded charges seem plausible.

In his reverence for the wonders of nature, Leonardo acknowledged the signs of a higher power. An agnostic at most, he nevertheless created moving and theologically profound images that reflect a deep understanding of the Christian faith. Some of those images have stamped an indelible impression on the Christian tradition, shaping the way we think about certain subjects and biblical events today. In a society that was essentially Christian, as Renaissance Italy was, it should not be surprising to find a man such as Leonardo who could accurately represent convictions he did not personally hold. Despite his lack of belief, Leonardo had a great appreciation for Christianity's grasp of the human condition and many of the values it advocated.

In the *Last Supper*, Leonardo assembles a remarkable cast of characters caught at the moment when Jesus announces that one of them will betray him, a moment pregnant with meaning. The words seem to ripple through the company like a wave, with each man reacting in his own fashion. Christ, the stable center, is framed by the light of a doorway directly behind, clearly designating him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Leonardo wrote that "to make perfect works of art, painters had to take their inspiration only from nature"—something he claimed to have learned from Masaccio. In order to make the ***Last Supper*** "real," he combed the streets looking for models for the simple fishermen who were Jesus' disciples. He walked the rough neighborhoods of Milan at night in search of the criminal element to find his Judas. But he struggled to identify a model for Jesus, finding no one with the qualities necessary to represent Christ, the God/Man. Yet somehow Leonardo managed to imbue that figure with a grace and transcendent mystery that seems to make one want to know him. That is the genius of Leonardo.

Raphael

(1483-1520)

Soon after Raphael's death at the age of 37 on Good Friday in 1520, the earth shook. It was said that heaven was repeating one of the cosmic signs that had occurred at the death of Christ—a poignant epitaph for the man who would be known as the "divine" Raphael.

Above his bier in the Pantheon was placed the unfinished painting of the ***Transfiguration of Christ***, which Raphael had been working on right before he died. Infused with a mystical power not seen in his work before, this painting has inspired speculation that Raphael may have been associated with the Oratory of Divine Love, a lay organization that promoted reform of the church through common prayer and fellowship, regular communion, and acts of charity. Although little is actually known about Raphael's personal faith, he was frequently described as a pious man with an easy temperament that accounts for his success as much as his ability. His one weakness appears to have been women, which proved to be a distraction from his work from time to time.

Like other Renaissance artists, Raphael was a man of many talents—in painting, sculpture, and even architecture. The son of an undistinguished court painter, he produced many beautiful paintings of the Madonna and Child in his early career. During a short stay in Florence, he was deeply affected by the work of Leonardo and Michelangelo. In Rome, he became a favorite artist of Pope Julius II and of his successor Leo X. His work exemplified the vision of an ennobled humanity made in the image of God and the dignity, order, and stability to which the Renaissance aspired.

Raphael's first project in Rome was the decoration of the Stanza della Segnatura, a room probably intended by Pope Julius II as his personal library in the papal apartments of the Vatican. Each of the walls is dedicated to one of the four paths to human wisdom: Theology (Revealed Truth), Philosophy (Rational Truth), Poetry (Beauty), and Law (Virtue or the Good). Set within a monumental architectural hall, Philosophy (the so-called ***School of Athens***) depicts a host of ancient philosophers with their students, discussing various issues. At the center, framed by an arch, walk Plato and Aristotle. Plato points to the heavens indicating his focus on the ideal, while Aristotle points down to the earth indicating his commitment to the observation of reality. The vigorous debates pictured in these murals effectively dispel any notion that argument was discouraged or feared by the church.

Raphael was working on these murals at the same time that Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling. According to a widespread legend, Raphael sneaked into the chapel one night to take a look at Michelangelo's work and was so overwhelmed by what he saw that he inserted the figure of a brooding Michelangelo at the front center of the ***School of Athens*** as an homage to the great artist. Although it is more likely that Raphael saw the ceiling when it was opened to the public, his own work was never the same. Dramatic action and dynamic figures learned from the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes, combined with a growing capacity to capture the personality of his subjects, make his later works even more compelling. Had his life not been cut short, his legacy would have rivaled that of Michelangelo.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 91: Michelangelo: Art for Faith's Sake

Michelangelo: Recommended Resources

Sources the editors found useful in compiling information for this issue, as well as books recommended by our authors.

General books on Christianity and art

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Michelangelo

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- Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, translated by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, 1991)
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Other artists in the "Gallery"

- Bruce Cole, *Masaccio and the Art of Early Renaissance Florence* (Indiana University Press, 1980)
- Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (University of Chicago Press, 1995)
- Ronald Lightbown, *Botticelli: Life and Work* (Abbeville Press, 1989)
- Roger Whiting, *Leonardo: A Portrait of the Renaissance Man* (Wellfleet Press, 1992)
- James H. Beck, *Raphael: The Stanza della Segnatura* (Braziller, 1993)

The historical context

- Craig D. Atwood, *Always Reforming: A History of Christianity Since 1300* (Mercer University Press, 2001)
- Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty* (Harper & Brothers, 1951)
- Elisabeth G. Gleason, *Reform Thought in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Scholars Press, 1981)
- Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (Longman, 1992)
- John W. O'Malley, "The Renaissance Papacy 1420-1565" in *The Papacy*, edited by Paul Johnson (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997)
- Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Eerdmans, 1997)

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 91: Michelangelo: Art for Faith's Sake

Delighted by doctrine

Timothy George

When Jaroslav Pelikan died at age 82 on May 13, 2006, the world of Christian scholarship lost its greatest living advocate and the best church historian America has ever produced. Words like "greatest" and "best" are frequently used in a loose manner simply to say something nice about someone but in the case of Jary, as his friends called him, they are really true.

The achievements of his life are remarkable: He wrote nearly 40 books and over a dozen reference works on numerous aspects of Christian history. He taught several generations of students at Valparaiso University, Concordia Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago, and, since 1962, Yale University. He served as Dean of the Graduate School at Yale and was also President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He received the Jefferson Award of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1983 and the John Kluge Prize for Lifetime Achievements in the Human Sciences in 2004. He presented the Gifford Lectures at University of Aberdeen and the Gilson Lectures at the University of Toronto and was awarded honorary degrees from 42 universities around the world.

Many other accomplishments could be listed, but accomplishments alone do not reveal the deepest passion of his soul to tell the story of the Christian tradition in all of its fullness, drama, coherence, romance, and rigor, thereby exposing the deepest textures of meaning inherent in the Christian message itself.

A Slavic heritage

Pelikan loved to quote this line from Goethe, his favorite poet: "What you have received as heritage, take now as task and thus you will make it your own." Pelikan's remarkable scholarly career was rooted in his Slavic family background. Both of his parents were born in Europe. Both his father and grandfather were Lutheran pastors. His mother was a schoolteacher who learned English by reading the essays of Emerson. They bequeathed to young Jary both a love for learning and a desire for God.

When he was a little boy and couldn't quite reach the dinner table, his parents had him sit on stacked-up volumes of Migne's *Patrologia*, a collection of patristic writings in the original languages. He later quipped, "I thus absorbed the church fathers *a posteriori!*" His facility with languages was astounding not only the classical tongues of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, but also German, Slovak, Czech, Dutch, Russian, Serbian, all the romance languages, and many more. On occasion he would stay up late at night listening to a short-wave radio to keep fresh his language skills including Albanian, which he once found useful in a conversation with a taxi driver. Pelikan's deep religious faith was nurtured on Luther's *Small Catechism*, the great chorales of J. S. Bach, and, above all, the Bible. Each of these Luther, Bach, and the Bible would play a major role in his scholarly work. Though he became an ordained Lutheran minister, Pelikan spent most of his life in the environs of the secular academy. But he never lost the rich faith he received as a small child. As he once confessed, "I was quite out of step with many in my generation, especially among theological scholars at universities, in never having had fundamental doubts about the essential rightness of the Christian faith, but having retained a continuing, if often quite unsophisticated, Slavic piety."

The grand scope of tradition

A precocious young Pelikan received both his seminary degree and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1946 at age 22. His first book, ***From Luther to Kierkegaard***, came out a few years later (1950). Soon Pelikan established himself as one of the most prolific Luther scholars of his generation. He was general editor for the 55-volume American edition of ***Luther's Works*** and wrote a separate volume on Luther's biblical exposition. Pelikan always had a great interest in ecumenical affairs. His book ***The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*** (1959), written on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, offered an irenic introduction to the world's largest Christian community.

It is said that Karl Barth drew up a plan for his "collected works" at age 10! Just so, Pelikan had a clear, detailed plan of what he called his "big book" early in his career. He would write a comprehensive history of Christian doctrine, an account of what "the church of Jesus Christ has believed, taught, and confessed on the basis of the word of God."

Only Adolf Harnack, the great scion of German liberal Protestantism, had attempted such a massive project with his three-volume ***History of Dogma***. Harnack, however, for all his erudition, had little sympathy with the doctrinal content of his subject and presented a version of Christianity freed from the dogmatic shackles of the past. Pelikan, working with the same historical rigor, approached his subject with much more sympathy. As he put it, "I found, not in theological liberalism and historical relativism (as so many of my predecessors, teachers, contemporaries did) but in tradition and orthodoxy, the presupposition from which to interpret any portion or period."

Pelikan's magnum opus eventually became five volumes that he called simply ***The Christian Tradition***. Though Pelikan fully recognized the great diversity and varied expressions of Christian teaching across the ages, he also stressed the underlying unity and continuity of what the New Testament calls "the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Jesus on safari

As a capstone to his lifelong interest in the central texts of the Christian faith, Pelikan edited (with Valerie Hotchkiss) what could only be called a second magnum opus ***Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition***, a four-volume critical edition with a one-volume historical and theological guide called simply ***Credo***.

Judaism has its ***shema*** and Islam its ***shahadah***, but Christians, responding to Jesus' question "Who do ***you*** say that I am?" have produced literally thousands of statements of faith across the centuries. Pelikan's collection includes several hundred of these, among them the Masai Creed from Nigeria. This creed Africanizes Christianity by declaring that Jesus "was always on safari doing good." It also declares that after Jesus had been "tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died, he lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended unto the skies. He is the Lord."

This creed was brought to Pelikan's attention by one of his students, a woman who had been a member of a religious order working in a hospital in East Nigeria. Pelikan commented on his reaction to this text: "And so she brought it to me, and I just got shivers, just the thought, you know, the hyenas did not touch him and the act of defiance God lives even in spite of the hyenas."

Living faith

Pelikan dealt with many deep and difficult subjects in his scholarly work, but he wrote in a simple, elegant style with a clarity that is compelling. He had a way of capturing profound truths in short, unforgettable statements. Among his most memorable are these: "Jesus Christ is too important to be left to the theologians"; "Everybody else is an expert on the present. I wish to file a minority report on behalf of the past"; and "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Though

he never quite matched the popular appeal of his Yale predecessor, Roland H. Bainton, some of Pelikan's books did reach a wider audience, including his *Jesus Through the Centuries* and *Whose Bible Is It?*

On March 25, 1998, the Feast Day of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pelikan and his wife Sylvia were received into the fellowship of the Orthodox Church in America. Pelikan remarked that while some might have been shocked by his act, few who knew him well could have been surprised. As he put it, "Any airplane that circled the airport for that long before landing would have run out of gas!" Indeed, Pelikan's tilt toward the East can be traced back to his Slavic roots, his love for the Eastern liturgy, his close friendship with the Orthodox theologian Georges Florovosky, and the sheer joy that permeates the pages of *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, the second volume of his history of doctrine. He spent the last years of his life serving on the Board of Trustees of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary.

I never had Jaroslav Pelikan as a classroom teacher, but I was one of his students, as everyone seriously interested in Christian history has to be. As a young student of historical theology, I once determined to read everything Pelikan had written. It is a daunting task, let me assure you: A 1995 bibliography of his works, which does not include his last prolific decade, runs to some 50 printed pages. He was a generous colleague and friend, and a great encourager.

Pelikan thrived in the world of the arts and sciences and wrote learnedly about art, politics, law, poetry, educational theory, and public ethics, as well as history and theology. But he did all of this as a scholar who was also a Christian. Jary Pelikan had a love for all things human and humane, and his work will enrich every person who looks at the world with intellectual curiosity and moral imagination. But his legacy will shine especially bright among those who follow Jesus Christ, belong to his church, and see the world through the eyes of the Savior's love.

Pelikan's *Bach Among the Theologians* concludes with a chapter titled "Johann Sebastian Bach between Secular and Sacred." Pelikan points out that Bach began his compositions by writing *Jesu Juva* (Jesus, help) and closed them by writing *Soli Deo Gloria* (to God alone be the glory). These are also good grace notes for one of the most diligent and faithful of the "Lord's remembrancers," as Cotton Mather called church historians.

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Fighting Demons In The Desert

How a book about one man's radical quest for God helped to redefine Christian discipleship and launch the monastic movement.

Chris Armstrong

The man acclaimed as "the father of monasticism" never dreamed of the huge impact he would have. But the new mode of discipleship he helped bring to birth in Egypt in the early 300s A.D. turned out to be one of the most momentous innovations in the church's first thousand years.

The book that started it all

Alexandrian bishop Athanasius (298-373) was exiled five times from his beloved church at the hands of Arian-sympathizing emperors. In one of these exiles, the staunchly orthodox, diminutive firebrand fulfilled a long-time dream by traveling to the desert to share the life of the hermits there. During what became a lengthy ascetic sojourn, he wrote what historian Derwas Chitty correctly calls "the first great manifesto of the monastic ideal." This was not some tidy, orderly rule of life, but rather a biography of the most gripping sort—of the best-known early monk and first "desert father," Antony of Egypt (251-356).

Antony was the son of a prosperous Egyptian peasant-farmer. Shortly after his father died, he heard at a church service the gospel words "Sell all you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me." In response, he sold his birthright—200 acres of lush, fertile Nile valley land—and began to live as a solitary at the edge of his small town.

This sort of hermit lifestyle was already a known practice in Egypt by Antony's youth, and it fascinated the young man. He apprenticed himself to a local holy man, absorbing from his elder everything he could learn about the ascetic life. **Askesis** meant "training"—especially the body-building the Greeks had always been so keen to practice in their "gymnasiums." It never entailed merely giving up things, like food or sexual relationships. Rather, it was a mode of exercising and training the **heart**.

The flight to the desert

Seeking further separation from the distractions of town life, the intense young man went out into the desert. This was **real** desert, not for the faint of heart: the scorching expanse of sand that covered the vast majority of Egypt outside the thin strip made green by the Nile's seasonal flooding. It was said that nothing could live in those parts except demons. This suited Antony. Like many Eastern Christians who followed him, he had a keen sense of the spiritual battle that surrounds all of us.

First the young man sealed himself in a tomb not far into the desert, depending on some villagers to bring him food. Then he moved farther out to a ruined Roman fortress on a mountain by the Nile, which became his home for 20 years. There he indeed encountered demons, in the form of wild beasts, sent by the devil to intimidate him. But Antony mocked them, reminding them that Christ had robbed them of any authority and cast them down. And not being able to withstand his scornful ridicule, they disappeared.

In 305, the second year of the last great persecution of the church, Antony emerged from his ruined fort

with the help of some villagers who broke down the fort's door. After 20 years shut away in solitude, he stood before them cheerful and in glowing health, in full possession of his senses, having attained the Greek ideal of *apatheia* or emotional equilibrium.

Learning of the persecution, Antony returned to the city and sat in court in silent solidarity with his Christian brothers and sisters soon to be martyred. Antony himself sought martyrdom, but it was not to be. Once he returned to the desert, a stream of people increasingly sought him out—some, perhaps, to escape the threat of death to Christians in the cities, others to prepare themselves for martyrdom, and still others simply coming to see what all the fuss was about. This was the time when, as Athanasius said, "the desert became a city," and Antony's fame spread far and wide as he dispensed healing miracles and words of wisdom to the gathering crowd of imitators and devotees.

Finally, in his sixties, Antony again grew restless for solitude and sought a deeper, more private corner of the desert in which to pursue God. Moved by the Spirit, he went with a caravan of Arabs several days' journey into the desert toward the Red Sea, to an isolated oasis at a mountain's foot. However, Antony's last attempt at solitude failed. Even at this remote retreat in the Eastern Desert, he found himself needing to maintain an herb garden to feed the many seekers who trekked through the desert to receive spiritual food from his lips. There, at his "inner mountain," where today stands the monastery of Saint Anthony the Great, Antony lived out the rest of his 105 years.

Monasticism's beloved father

Apart from being compellingly written and describing a larger-than-life subject, Athanasius's biography of Antony commanded attention by its discerning description of the monastic life's twin energy. This double dynamic, learned from the apostles and early martyrs, consisted on the one hand of athletic, near-heroic self-exertion and self-interrogation, and on the other of God's gracious help from heaven through Christ—a duality that would shape all future monastic movements.

Within a few decades after Athanasius completed the *Life of Saint Antony* in 357, not only the Greek-speaking Christians of the eastern Mediterranean but also the Latins in Italy and Gaul knew of Antony. By 400, he was already a figure of legendary proportions—perhaps the first real "Christian celebrity."

As the Middle Ages dawned, only a dwindling few chose to imitate Antony's solitary form of spiritual life, while most flocked to the cenobitic (communal) form. Antony remained, however, the beloved father of all monks. Throughout the medieval period, each monastic revival looked back in filial devotion and held itself up to the glass of Antony's ancient Egyptian movement. In this way, the life story of Antony has become for his heirs, says the late Dom Jean Leclercq, "a living text, a means of formation of a monastic life."

Indeed, the open secret of monasticism is that it has always spread by imitation rather than theoretical instruction. Monasticism is ultimately a thing you do rather than think about or learn. Thus it is fitting that a biography, rather than a rule, is really the founding document of the movement. Says the modern English translator of the *Life*, Robert Gregg, "The testings and miracles of Antony fixed themselves in the consciousness of the Church and of Western culture as a sharp image of what a life committed to God demands and promises."

In a symbolic act at the end of Antony's life, he had one of his two sheepskin cloaks given to his friend Bishop Athanasius. In response, Athanasius felt that the greatest and most important tribute he could pay his treasured friend and model Antony would be to spread the contagion of his special style of discipleship by making the monk's story known in a short biography. Thereby, thousands who had never met this spiritual warrior of the wastelands would fall under his magnetic influence.

Never have a writer's aspirations been so powerfully fulfilled.

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Portrait of the Artist as a Servant

The masterpieces of Fra Angelico showed painter Bruce Herman the beauty of Christian truth—and his own calling as a Christian artist.

Bruce Herman

As a young man growing up in the 1960s, I was involved in everything that is stereotypically "'60s"—psychedelics, rock, communes, free love, and that anarchical spirit that viewed tradition as dead and stultifying. I was also deeply involved in Eastern mysticism and even followed a guru in India, seeking esoteric knowledge that Western culture and Christianity seemed powerless to give. In college I slept through lectures on 15th-century Italian painters, steeped as they all were in Christendom and its aims and stories.

I slept through those lectures partly because I viewed most of art history as irrelevant—at best a dusty memento that held little *gravitas* either for me or for my generation. My fellow art students and I wanted to make images that carried emotional weight, and for the most part we were all expressionists—that is, we were less interested in art for the sake of any particular community of shared ideas or values, and more concerned with evoking the personal angst of our existential predicament. I saw my art as a means of deepening my own personal spiritual quest—a path that lay largely outside the precincts of settled religion.

At that time my graduate advisor Philip Guston, a prominent New York painter, gave an intimate lecture to nine of us painters holed up in our warren of art studios in an old car warehouse in Boston. He told us a story from his life that helped galvanize my own sense of purpose as a painter. While on a tour of Italy, Guston had visited the masterpiece of his hero Piero della Francesca—a mural cycle called *The Legend of the True Cross* in the Cappella de San Francesco in Arezzo. Guston had looked up at the magnificent and complex set of images surrounding the little chapel and wept. When a friend had asked him what was wrong, he had replied, "We don't have a story. These Christians ... *they* had a story." Guston said to us, "So go and paint from your hearts. Be like those early Christians who went underground and were willing to stake everything on what they believed." Of course, he wasn't advocating that we actually become Christians.

What he didn't know, however, was that I was already beginning to read the Bible and consider converting to Christianity. Later that year, I received a grant from Boston University to live and travel in Italy for a year like my mentor had done. That time in Italy was pivotal for both my faith and my life as an artist. My visits to the Monastery San Marco in Florence that housed the famous frescoes of Fra Angelico became an island of sanity for me in a tumultuous inner life of spiritual conflict. The quiet, unassuming style of the master, combined with his luminous color palette and contemplative imagery, moved me beyond what words can say.

History and tradition suddenly began to seem like a refuge from the meaninglessness and angst of the 20th century.

Ten years later, after my conversion, I found myself again in Italy with a small group of Christian artists on a grant-funded art trip. Providentially, our studio was a block away from Monastery San Marco, and several of us visited Fra Angelico's lovely murals nearly every day. In one memorable conversation, Tanja Butler (one of the artists in the group) pointed out that Fra Angelico's servant heart and deep personal faith in Christ had prompted him to acquire his skills as an artist and to serve his community of

fellow monks by painting the famous murals. The thought of an artist being given an opportunity to use his gift to build up a body of believers struck me like a lightning bolt.

That conversation and that month with fellow Christian artists in Italy changed my life and continues to nourish me artistically and spiritually as I attempt to do literally what Philip Guston had meant only metaphorically—to paint from the heart and "go underground" in an art world that largely ignores sincere sacred imagery in this age of shock tactics and mere novelty. I am still looking for those opportunities to serve as my hero Fra Angelico did so long ago, but many more come my way every day.

Thanks be to God.

Bruce Herman is an artist living in Gloucester, Massachusetts. To see more of his work, go to www.brucehermanonline.com.

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