Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*: Revelations and Restorations of a Masterpiece

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Introduction/Research Questions

For centuries Michelangelo Buonarroti has been defined as "the Divine One" by artists of the time, modern historians, and spectators of his pieces. His mastery in the field of arts was so astonishing that people "perceived his artwork to be otherworldly" (Smithers), as only God could have guided such a brilliant mind (Marzoli and Ripepi). Indeed, *The Last Judgment*—one of his greatest and most complex masterpieces—is a faithful and tangible proof of this. But in the exploration of his grandiosity, two questions evidently formulate:

1. What is it exactly that makes this work so important?
2. And how is it possible that a 1536-1541 painting has survived in such pristine condition?

An analysis of the most notable sections of the painting and a study in the restorative process will aim to answer both questions.

Theme

- The "resurrection of the body on the final day" (Hall 89).
- The judgment of humanity and the opposing destiny of the human: salvation on the left side, condemnation on the right.

Figures

Over 300 dynamic figures. Their motion and expressions make the piece alive.

- Each figure has its own life, past, and story.
- Michelangelo's study of human anatomy → Depiction of the natural human body
- Their beauty is also expressed in their:
  - -Strategic placement
  - -Characteristic elements
  - -Meaning within the composition

Dante Alighieri's Reference



Michelangelo had a deep admiration for Dante, reflected in the addition of two figures from Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

- Charon transports the damned to hell, painted as Dante describes him in his narrative poem (Condivi 84).

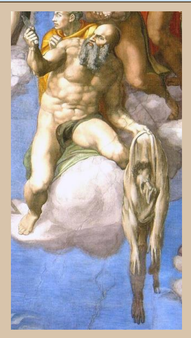


- Minos is represented as a satirical illustration of Biagio da Cesena.

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Because Cesena's first comment was a complaint about the excessive nudity in the painting, Michelangelo decided to portray him with ass-ears, a symbol of ignorance (Wallace 42).

Saint Bartholomew



Saint Bartholomew's figure is holding a flayed skin, which represents:

1. The rough symbol of his martyrdom
2. Michelangelo's self-portrait, the crudest, yet most truthful expression of his decayed state of being (Marzoli and Ripepi).

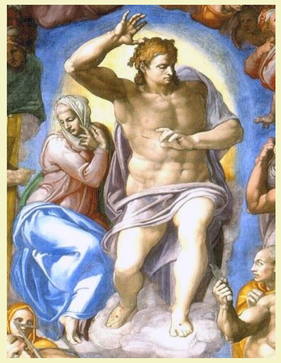
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Michelangelo worked on this painting at a mature age, a moment where the consciousness of the human tends to leave the so-glorious spirit of life and meets with the *reflection* of what has been lived so far. This reflection explains why the painting is "inner-directed," as a conflict between "the magical goal of suspending time, with its unrelenting process of aging" (Liebert 345). Certainly, no matter how exceptional, rather divine, the artist could have been, the fate that he was painting in the *Last Judgment* was something that neither he, nor anyone, could have avoided.



The Christ and the Virgin

- The Christ emerges from the only source of pure light, symbol of his divine nature (Marzoli and Ripepi).
  1. His young appearance represents:
     - -Authority (Hall 89)
     - -Glory
     - -Strength
  2. The Son of God dictates the destiny of the souls:
     - -Damns the guilty with His mighty right hand
     - -Calls the righteous to Him (Condivi 84).
- The Virgin Mary sits on His right, passive and subtle. → She is the only figure that is entirely clothed, symbol of purity and respect



Alterations in the Blue Lapis Lazuli

The blue lapis lazuli that colored the sky was extremely complex to restore (Mancinelli 185).

- Only the blue layer painted in fresco (wet plaster) survived. The finishes a secco (dry plaster) did not.
- The sky presented:
  - -Whitish lines
  - -Darker tones in the center
  - -Lighter tones in lower sections (185)
- Past restorations using vegetable oil, acidic and alkaline substances contributed to these alterations (185).

The Braghettone's Intervention



Daniele da Volterra was ordered to cover the nudity of the figures.

- Added garments and draperies: "braghe," hence the nickname *braghettone* (Mancinelli 174).
- Scraped away part of the fresco to repaint some figures (174) → St. Blaise and St. Catherine repainted in buon fresco: on wet plaster (174)
- Smaller loincloth additions painted in tempera and a secco: on dry plaster (174).

Before the Cleanings

Test cleanings performed to evaluate the state of conservation of the painting, highly irregular (Mancinelli 180).

- Laboratory tests to understand:
  - -Pigments and technique
  - -Foreign matter (183)
- Previous restorations focused on retouching instead of cleanings, using materials that darkened the colors (Colalucci 192).

Foreign Matter

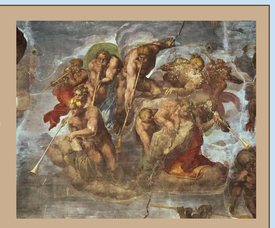
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1. Fungi, bacteria, and yeast (183)
2. Humidity and candle smoke
3. Salt from rain and moisture (198)
4. Vegetable oil and glue from past restorations

Restoration

The restoration began in 1990, after cleaning Sistine Chapel's ceiling, and concluded in 1994.

- Restorers revived the painting following Michelangelo's path, "brushstroke by brushstroke" (Colalucci 190).
- A first removal of dust immediately revealed the bright colors underneath (189).





- Important decision on the later loincloth additions → Only sixteenth century's censorial interventions were saved: historical value (197).
- Air-conditioning system built to maintain the air inside the chapel clean (198).

Materials		Purpose
1. Gelatinous solvent mixture/water (Colalucci 197)	→	Clean fresco areas
2. Non-water-based solvents (197)	→	Clean a secco details
3. Light fixative (198)	→	Consolidate paint exposed to salt

Conclusion

Michelangelo really did something that few have done before, creating one of the most meaningful works ever made. One could study each little element of the composition and still not have fully reached the entirety of the ideas that Michelangelo intended to show. Yet and more than anything, the artist was able to present the reality of the final judgment by being himself immersed in the same complexity he paints, a characteristic that would be rather difficult to study if it wasn't for the 1990-1994 restoration, which revived the original perfection of the piece.

It is certain that the answer to the initial question searching for the why of his painting's greatness can extend indefinitely, but if few characteristics were to prevail, they would point to Michelangelo's incredible genius and ability to tell a message in a tangible and visible form. For instance, in this painting he successfully depicted the message of salvation in a raw and human way, which ultimately makes his work impeccable, real, and extremely profound.

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