

**This photo is available in the print version of
Heaven and Hell.**

With complex images of death, judgment, heaven, and hell, Michelangelo confronts us politically as well as personally. We are not the final judges of reality. Christ is.

*Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564), LAST JUDGMENT, detail, 1536-41, Fresco, 48' x 44'.
Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome.*

Confronted

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Among the least comfortable scenes for artists to paint, or us to consider, is the evaluation of men and women at the Last Judgment. “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn,” warns Matthew, “and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (24:30-31).

Michelangelo’s fresco, *Last Judgment*, combines images of death, final judgment, heaven, and hell, to depict the mystery surrounding Christ’s second coming to judge the world and the confusion among humans that it engenders. In its important location, the fresco is a political as well as a personal confrontation, as we shall see.

Pope Clement VII de Medici (1523-34) first approached Michelangelo in 1534 to replace the Sistine Chapel altar fresco, Perugino’s *Assumption of the Virgin*, with a “resurrection” scene. Perhaps he wanted a depiction of the resurrection of souls or of the last judgment. Clement died later that year and his successor, Pope Paul III Farnese (1534-49), supervised the project. Michelangelo produced for the new altar wall in the Pope’s private chapel one of the most magnificent scenes of the final judging of individuals for their placement in heaven or hell. *Last Judgment* replaced not only the Perugino fresco behind the altar, but also the scenes of the *Nativity* and the *Finding of Moses* on either side. Michelangelo’s figures are over life-size and his composition fills almost the entire west wall of the chapel, which is an unusual placement because traditionally a last judgment image would be placed on the east, entrance wall of any church building.

Several major works that he studied often as a child in Florence influenced Michelangelo: the medieval *Last Judgment* mosaic in the Baptistery, Orcagna’s frescoes in Santa Croce, Florence, and Nardo di Cione’s *Hell* in Santa Maria Novella. The artist also studied Giotto’s *Last Judgment* in Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel in Padua and was influenced by Dante’s great poem, *Inferno*.

Being dragged from their graves, in the lower left, people are led upwards to receive their judgment by Christ “on the clouds of heaven.” The

angels below Christ blow their “loud trumpet call” in the center of the composition. Hell is depicted on the lower right side of the fresco. Charon, the transporter of the dead to Hades in ancient Greek stories, herds the damned out of his boat with an oar. Snakes entwine several figures, while others are swallowed up in the murky area below.

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Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), LAST JUDGMENT, detail of the lower section.

The beardless Christ is located in the central area of the painting that is best lit by the natural light of the chapel windows. Often considered a “damning” figure, he draws up the dead with his left arm and casts down those consigned to hell with his right arm. Christ’s proportions and exaggerated gestures reflect *La Maniera*, the Mannerist style, which flourished between the High Renaissance and Baroque styles of art. Mary is seated on the favored right side of Christ. Michelangelo’s self-portrait is believed to be located on the flayed skin of the martyred apostle Bartholomew, held by the figure in the lower right who now looks up in terror at his Judge.

Last Judgment was recently cleaned and restored to its glorious color and power. The rich ultramarine blue is recovered in the sky and on various pieces of drapery throughout the colossal painting. The nude figures are restored to their original appearance; Michelangelo’s assistant, Daniele da Volterra, had covered them during the intense scrutiny of Roman Catholic art prompted by the Council of Trent (1545-63). Christians in the sixteenth century frequently challenged the nudity within the composition. For instance, Pietro Aretino, a contemporary of Michelangelo, criticized the fresco for being merely a display of skill and not a decorous handling of the holy subject. Despite this, engravings of the fresco were published frequently, and at least one inquisitor remarked that there was nothing that was not “spiritual” about the nudes of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*.

The original audience for this fresco, given its prominent location in the Pope's private chapel, was the theologically well-educated, powerful leadership of the government and church. Yet Michelangelo confronts them with images of confusion and concern, presented in a complex manner. They are not the final judges of reality. Christ is.

As twenty-first century viewers, we should consider not only the historical context in which Michelangelo, his patron the Pope, and the sixteenth-century viewers would see the work, but also our personal concerns about the last judgment, heaven, and hell. *Last Judgment* disturbs us to ask, "Where might I be during the final reckoning imaged in this painting?"



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