

MICHELANGELO'S *LAST JUDGMENT*: THE INFLUENCE OF THE  
*LAOCOÖN AND HIS SONS*

by

MICHAEL P. KEMLING

(Under the Direction of Shelley Zuraw)

ABSTRACT

Michelangelo adapted the form and type of the *Laocoön* for the central Christ group in the *Last Judgment*. The ancient model allows for the identification of the nude figure to the right of Christ as Adam. Michelangelo's repeated interest in *Laocoön* is examined from its rediscovery in 1506, to the artist's last major project prior the *Last Judgment*, the Medici Chapel Tomb Project. In the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo visually connects the altar wall with the previous ceiling decoration with the ancient model's form and iconography.

INDEX WORDS: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Laocoön and His Sons*, *Last Judgment*, Medici Chapel, Sistine Chapel, Antiquity, Fresco, Sistine Ceiling, Christ, Virgin, Adam, Drawings

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## DEDICATION

For my wife, Brenda.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his monumental five-volume work on Michelangelo, Charles de Tolnay described Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (Fig. 1) as conceived "as an autonomous artistic and spiritual entity."<sup>1</sup> Although he did not interpret the *Last Judgment*'s iconography as an extension of the chapel's previous cycles, it can be argued that Michelangelo himself viewed the altar wall as a continuation of his previous work in the chapel.<sup>2</sup> The artist, in fact, did consider how the altar wall would relate visually, as well as symbolically, to the ceiling's Old Testament narrative. Michelangelo's ceiling narrative and altar wall compliment the previous chapel decorations on the lower side walls that illustrate the history of the Church as represented by the lives of Moses and Christ, as well as the papal portraits.<sup>3</sup> Raphael's tapestries, depicting the Acts of the Apostles, were commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1515 and were installed along the chapel's lower register by 1521.<sup>4</sup> The frescoes on the side walls demonstrate Christ's fulfillment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: The Final Period*, Volume V (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960): 28.

<sup>2</sup> John Shearman argued in a paper presented at the Vatican in 1990 that the decoration of the altar wall was conceived when Michelangelo was painting the ceiling for Pope Julius II, which the author based on the placement of the prophet Jonah, see Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment: The Renaissance Response* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998): 48, 142 n. 26.

<sup>3</sup> The earlier cycles demonstrated that Christ was the fulfillment of Moses' Old Testament Law. The frescoes reinforced the idea of legitimate succession, which continued onto the papacy. For discussions regarding the previous frescoes cycles, see Leopold D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel Before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965; John K.G. Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel*, London: Phaidon Press, 1972; and Johannes Wilde, *Michelangelo: Six Lectures*, (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1978): 48-84.

<sup>4</sup> The scenes that were hanging when Michelangelo returned to paint the *Last Judgment* were the stories of "Paul at Athens," the "Sacrifice at Lystra," the "Conversion of the Proconsul," the "Conversion of Paul,"

Old Law, and the establishment of the New Law.<sup>5</sup> Michelangelo's two frescoes relate to each other in a similar manner. The ceiling frescoes depict the beginning of human existence, whereas the *Last Judgment* represents the apocalyptic event that will end human time on earth and thus, is the culmination of the entire chapel, itself a *summa* of Christian history and theology.

Although there is evidence that Michelangelo began preparations for the *Last Judgment* while in Florence, the artist started to fresco the altar wall in April 1536, and it was revealed to the public in October 1541. Almost immediately following its unveiling, the fresco was criticized for its complexity, in part because the audience was unable to identify all the characters represented.<sup>6</sup> Even among Michelangelo's biographers, Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi, there are conflicting interpretations and both authors had trouble identifying the figures represented.<sup>7</sup> Certain elements of the fresco were overlooked by those within Michelangelo's immediate circles, if not completely misunderstood.<sup>8</sup> However, unlike most previous *Last Judgments*, the Sistine Chapel was intended for the elite clergy and not a congregation of laymen.<sup>9</sup>

Michelangelo's altar wall is not only connected to his ceiling frescoes iconographically, but also visually through Michelangelo's use of the ancient sculpture

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the "Charge to Peter," the "Healing of Lameman," and the "Death of Annias." For the history of the tapestries, see Shearman (1972), 138-164.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> In a letter dated to 1545, Pietro Aretino mentions the difficulty of the fresco, "I hear it said that in the design of his stupendous *Last Judgment* there are some allegorical senses of great profundity which are understood only by a few." Marcia B. Hall, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*: Resurrection of the Body and Predestination," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 92, note 22; also in Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968): 189. See also Barnes, 80-84.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 2 vols. (Gaston du C. de Vere, trans. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996): II, 693; Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl, second edition (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1999): 83-87; See also Barnes, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Barnes, 71-74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



*Laocoön and His Sons* (Fig. 2). The ancient sculpture served as the model for the Christ group at the center of the *Last Judgment*. Michelangelo's use of the sculpture is apparent in the *Last Judgment*'s central group, which is comprised of the figures of Christ, the Virgin, and a previously unidentified figure to Christ's right, between Saints Peter and Bartholomew. This study will consider Michelangelo's use of the *Laocoön* from the time of its discovery through his references to the statue in the *Last Judgment* in an attempt to fully understand how the artist used the statue visually. Much of this study relies heavily on the monumental work of Charles de Tolnay. However, his scholarship was only the launching point. Combined with detailed visual analysis and interpretations from a new generation of scholarship, this thesis identifies how Michelangelo visually and symbolically connected the *Last Judgment* with the previous ceiling decoration through the use of the *Laocoön*.

The *Laocoön* was a constant source of inspiration for Michelangelo from the time of the sculpture's discovery in 1506 until the artist's death in 1564.<sup>10</sup> However, Michelangelo did not mindlessly copy the ancient sculpture, but used it as a source for his development of a monumental figural type. Vasari went to great lengths in his *Vita* of the artist to establish Michelangelo's innovative use of the antique in general.<sup>11</sup> His awareness of Michelangelo's source can easily be confirmed by the eye. Beginning with the sculpture of *St. Matthew* (Fig. 3) for the Florence Cathedral, attention will be drawn to those works from Michelangelo's *oeuvre* that demonstrate the artist's innovative

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<sup>10</sup> This study will not address those of Michelangelo's works produced after the *Last Judgment*, although scholars have connected the *Laocoön* to some of the artist's major works from this late period. See Irving Lavin, "The Sculptor's 'Last Will and Testament,'" *Allen Memorial Art Bulletin* 35 (1977/1978): 4-39;

<sup>11</sup> Vasari "Preface to the Third Part," (1996): I, 621-2-623; For a discussion, see Irving Lavin, "'Ex uno lapide': The Renaissance Sculptor's *Tour de Force*." In Matthais Winner, ed. *Il Cortile delle Statue: Der Statue des Belvedere im Vatikan* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1998): 191-210.

conceptions of the human body that are based, in part, on the *Laocoön*. However, Michelangelo's use of the ancient statue was not limited to the study of human form in motion as he utilized all aspects of statue, including its composition.

A detailed comparison of the *Last Judgment*'s central group and the ancient sculpture assumes the viewer's ability to metaphorically remove the Christ group from the composition. Although the main element of a much larger and multi-figured composition, this central group functions independently. The main action of the wall centers around Christ, the Virgin, and the unidentified figure, while the rest of the characters react to the gestures of Christ. Once Michelangelo's use of *Laocoön* is established, the identification of a previously unknown figure to the right of Christ becomes possible. Based on Vasari's description of the figures that surround the Christ, and with the aid of biblical passages, the figure can be accurately identified as Adam.

Michelangelo's development of the *Last Judgment* composition can be traced through extant drawings for the project. The drawings indicate that early in the commission the artist planned to use the *Laocoön* as a model for the central Christ group. The ancient sculpture served to connect the previous ceiling decoration visually, as well as symbolically to the altar wall fresco. The ceiling panel of the *Separation of Light from Darkness* (Fig. 4) depicts not only God's first act of creation, but also contains evidence of the statue's influence. In the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo makes the sculpture's influence more explicit. The figures of Christ, the Virgin, and the figure on Christ's right side establish a visual relationship between the ceiling and altar wall decorations. When Michelangelo's program is considered collectively, the apparent inspiration of the

*Laocoon* assists in visually connecting the ceiling and altar wall, as well as carrying the theme of human time from the alpha to the omega.

This study examines how Michelangelo used the ancient statue both as a formal model and, as well as for its narrative associations, to further strengthen his compositions. However, it is first important to identify those aspects of the *Laocoön* that made it unique among the ancient works known in the sixteenth century. The most admired aspects of the statue during the first half of the sixteenth century was the realism of its anatomy and physiognomy, in other words, the action and emotions of the figures that articulates their expressive strife.<sup>12</sup> The Trojan priest, Laocoön, is seated with his chest projecting forward and his head thrown back. The violent twisting of his body causes his upper extremities to project away from his torso. The aged man grasps a snake with his left arm, pulling it away laterally in an attempt to stop the snake from biting his hip. His right leg is seen frontally and conforms to the right angle of the marble block upon which he sits, while his left leg breaks away from the central axis of his body at a forty-five degree angle. Laocoön's anguished facial expression, with rolled eyes under a furrowed brow and flexed jaw, attests to the physical and psychological torment he is enduring, which is further accentuated by the coils of his beard and moustache that frame his gaping mouth.

Mimicking his father's pose, Laocoön's son on the left throws his head back and extends his right arm above his head. Although his upper arm no longer exists, the articulated musculature of his exposed shoulder indicates the arm would have been raised

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981): 244.

above his head.<sup>13</sup> His left arm reaches across his body and attempts to pry the second snake's bite. The son's mouth, like his father's, is agape expressing his frightened state.

The right son, who is larger than his younger brother, raises his left leg as he stands on his right.<sup>14</sup> He hunches over his raised leg to push the snake's tail off his ankle with his left hand. As he extends his right arm towards the center, he looks at his father under a furrowed brow. The treatment of his hair is more controlled in comparison to the other two figures, whose undulating coiled locks further emphasize their loss of control.

The complex composition formed by the sculpture's three figures is locked together by the snakes that coil around all their bodies. The Trojan priest rises from the center, with a son on either side, forming a visually stable tripartite composition. Combined with the above-mentioned elements, these unique characteristics gave the *Laocoön* its early fame.<sup>15</sup> However, it was Michelangelo's association with the statue that certainly made it one of the most influential discoveries of ancient statuary in the sixteenth century.

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of history of the reconstruction, see Seymour Howard's two articles, "On the Reconstruction of the Vatican Laocoon Group," *American Journal of Archaeology* 63 (October 1959): 365-369; and "Laocoon Restored," *American Journal of Archaeology* 63 (July 1989): 417-422.

<sup>14</sup> The right son has been identified as a Roman addition, and not a part of the original Greek composition. For discussions, see B. Andreae, ed. *Bilderkatalog der Skulpturen des Vatikanischen Museums: Museo Pio Clementino Cortile Ottagono* (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1998): V-VII; and Michael Koortbojian, "Pliny's Laocoön?" in Alina Payne, Ann Kuttner, and Rebekah Smick, eds., *Antiquity and Its Interpreters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 199-216.

<sup>15</sup> By 1523, the *Laocoön* was said to have eclipsed even the fame of the *Apollo Belvedere*, Eugenio Albèri, ed. "Sommario del viaggio degli Oratori Veneti che andarano a Roma a dar l'obbedienza a Papa Adriano

## CHAPTER I

### THE *LAOCOÖN* IN MICHELANGELO'S ARTISTIC VOCABULARY

The statue of the *Laocoön and His Sons* (Fig. 2) was excavated from the ancient Baths of Titus near Santa Maria Maggiore on January 14, 1506.<sup>16</sup> Pope Julius II, anxious to add the sculpture to his collection, immediately called upon Giuliano da Sangallo to inspect the discovery. Michelangelo, who had just returned to Rome from Carrara, was asked to accompany Sangallo to the site.<sup>17</sup> Upon their arrival both artists recognized the sculpture as the group praised by Pliny in his *Natural History*, in which he described the work as carved from one block of stone, “*ex uno lapide*.”<sup>18</sup> This feat was greatly admired in the Renaissance, and contributed to the statue's fame. Michelangelo recognized Pliny's information was incorrect, however, when the excavation proved the statue was not made from one block but from many. In a letter from June 1506, Cesare Trivulzio provided the earliest account of the discovery: “They [Michelangelo and Sangallo] say that Pliny was deceived, or wished to deceive others, in order to render the work more impressive....The authority of Pliny is great, but our artists can also be right; nor should

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VI 1523” in *Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti al Senato*, VII (Florence, 1846): 77-120, cited in Haskell Penny, 243.

<sup>16</sup> For a brief history of the sculpture in the sixteenth century, see Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources*, (London and Oxford: H. Miller and Oxford University Press, 1986): 152-155.

<sup>17</sup> For a chronology of Michelangelo's early travels between Florence and Rome, see William E. Wallace, “Michelangelo In and Out of Florence Between 1500 and 1508,” in Serafina Hager, ed., *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael in Renaissance Florence from 1500 to 1508*, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992): 57.

<sup>18</sup> According to Pliny, the sculpture adorned the Palace of Titus in Rome, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938): book XXXVI, iv, line 37.

one undervalue that ancient saying: ‘How fortunate the arts would be if they were judged solely by artists.’”<sup>19</sup> Even so, Michelangelo was said to have remarked that the work was a testament to the achievements of stone carving.<sup>20</sup> Every account of the *Laocoön*’s discovery that was written in Michelangelo’s lifetime included a statement by the artist; it is clear that his contemporaries made an immediate and permanent connection between Michelangelo and the Hellenistic sculpture.<sup>21</sup> This relationship articulated by his contemporaries served to confirm Michelangelo’s genius in his use of the antique sculpture as a model in the development of an energetic figural type, previously unseen in the sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Whether these accounts are authentic or an attempt by Michelangelo’s biographers to mythicize the event is less important than the link established by the artist himself to the sculpture.

The *Laocoön* was one of the most influential discoveries of ancient statuary in the sixteenth century. Almost every Renaissance artist knew the *Laocoön* through written descriptions or by reproductions in drawings, prints, and scaled facsimiles.<sup>23</sup> Baccio

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<sup>19</sup> The letter is reproduced in Giovanni Bottari and Stefano Ticozzi, *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura* (Milan, 1822): III, 475-6. It is translated into English by Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999): 111-112.

<sup>20</sup> Boissard states “Hanc Michael Angelus dicit esse miraculum artis singulare: in quo divinum artificum debeamus suspicere ingenium Pontius quam ad imitationem nos accingere,” *Romanae urbis topographiae et antiquitatum*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1597-1602): 13f.; cited in Paola Barocchi, ed., *Giorgio Vasari: La vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, 5 vols. (Milan and Naples: Sansoni, 1962-72): IV, 201.

<sup>21</sup> Irving Lavin (1998), 195-196.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Agosti and Vincenzo Farinella, *Michelangelo e l’arte classica* (Florence: Cantini Edizioni d’Arte, 1987): 54. See also George Bull, *Michelangelo: A Biography*, (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995), 67-68.

<sup>23</sup> In 1586, Giovanni Battista Armenini attested to seeing copies of the *Laocoön* in artists’ studios of almost every major Italian city; *On the True Precepts of the Art of Painting*, ed. and trans. Edward J. Olszewski, (New York: Burt Franklin and Co., 1977): 132; Barkan, 10. For a discussion of the statue’s influence see Margarete Bieber, *Laocoön: The Influence of the Group since its Rediscovery* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967): *passim*.

Bandinelli carved the first large-scaled copy between 1520-5 (Fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> The sculptor proclaimed that he had outdone the ancients by using only three pieces of marble, which was fewer than in the original.<sup>25</sup> Vasari recorded Michelangelo's opinion of those artists that mindlessly copy ancient sculptures: "A friend asked him [Michelangelo] what he thought of one who had copied some of the most celebrated antique marble figures... He [Michelangelo] replied, 'He who goes behind others can never go in front of them, and he who is not able to work well for himself cannot make good use of the works of others.'"<sup>26</sup> Michelangelo's retort hints at a rivalry between the two artists, one which continued well into old age when Bandinelli attempted to outdo Michelangelo's *Florentine Pietà* by carving a multi-figured sculpture for his own tomb.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, Michelangelo states exactly how an artist should use ancient models. Bandinelli's mimetic copy is merely a technical feat and does not exhibit the *concetto* or *fantasia* that Vasari went to great lengths to associate with Michelangelo's genius.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Bandinelli, Michelangelo did not attempt to strip the *Laocoön* of its glory by apishly copying it. Instead the statue was to serve as a model in his construction of expressive human anatomy. Michelangelo probably spent hours studying the marble, perhaps even making drawings of it, although none survive. The contemporary literature suggests that he even helped piece the statue together, metaphorically bringing the

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<sup>24</sup> Bandinelli was not the first artist to copy the sculpture, though his is the largest. For a discussion of early history of copies after the work, see Rona Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002): 351-354. Also see Arnold von Salis, *Antike und Renaissance*, (Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1947): 255-258.

<sup>25</sup> The existing *Laocoön* was made from five blocks, Goffen, 351-3.

<sup>26</sup> In Vasari's "Life of Michelangelo," (1996): Volume II, 743.

<sup>27</sup> Lavin (1998): 198.

<sup>28</sup> Lavin (1977-78): 20-23.

sculpture back to life.<sup>29</sup> This experience of handling the work may have permitted Michelangelo to study the structural elements as well as the overall form of the sculpture. The effect of this study is first evident in the figure of *St. Matthew*, 1506-8 (Fig. 3), for the Florence Cathedral.<sup>30</sup> The artist received the commission for twelve apostles to line the nave of the Florence Cathedral on April 24, 1503.<sup>31</sup> Michelangelo's earliest conception for the statue was sketched on a sheet dated between 1503 and 1504, presently located in the British Museum (Fig. 6), and slightly later in a more developed state on a sheet in the Uffizi (Fig. 7).<sup>32</sup> The drawing associated with the apostle is seen twice on the British Museum sheet, on the left and right sides. Both figures are seen from the right side and show a standing man with his weight supported on the left leg. The right leg rests upon a small stone block, the slightly raised knee projects forward to support the saint's large book. The left arm is brought across the body, thus turning the torso to the right and counteracting the movement of the lower extremities. The spiraling action terminates with the leftward motion of the head. The figure in the Uffizi drawing is viewed from the same vantage point and repeats the same position as the British

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<sup>29</sup> Cesare Trivulzio's letter of 1506 mentions Michelangelo helping piece the ancient sculpture together. For a discussion, see Philipp Fehl, "Michelangelo's Tomb in Rome: Observations on the 'Pietà' in Florence and the 'Rondanini Pietà'" *Artibus et historiae* 45 (2002): 10.

<sup>30</sup> John Pope-Hennessy suggests the *Laocoön* influenced Michelangelo's sculpture, *An Introduction to Italian Sculpture: Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 3 volumes (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1955-1963): II, 13. Based on documents, Michael J. Amy, in his recent article suggests that the sculpture was carved after Michelangelo's return to Florence from Rome in April 1506; "The Dating of Michelangelo's *St. Matthew*," *Burlington Magazine* 142 (2002): 495. This date is also supported by O. Ollendorff, "Der Laoköon und Michelangelo's gefesselter Sklave," *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* XXI (1898): 114-15; and Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: Youth*, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947): 114.

<sup>31</sup> The commission's date is recorded in the Archivio dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence (II-2-9, Deliberazioni, 1499-1507, folios 189v-190v); Michael Hirst, "Michelangelo in Florence: 'David' in 1503 and 'Hercules' in 1506," *Burlington Magazine* 142 (2000): 490; and Amy (2002), 493.

<sup>32</sup> Johannes Wilde places the British Museum sheet between these years based on the inclusion of other projects' designs, see *Michelangelo and His Studio: Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, (London: British Museum Publications, 1953; reprinted 1975); 4-9. For the Uffizi sheet, see Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo and His Drawings*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988); 3.



Museum sketches. It is more developed in design with greater assurance in the delineation of the line. The drawing indicates Michelangelo's possible resolution of the pose, although he made later modifications to the design before carving the *St. Matthew*.

Some scholars believe that the carving of the present statue began after the discovery of the *Laocoön*, based both on documents and stylistic evidence.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the twisting of the apostle's form was partially conceived prior to the *Laocoön*'s discovery as seen in the British Museum and Uffizi sheets.<sup>34</sup> The drawings suggest that Michelangelo was attempting to develop a composition that offered the viewer an ideal vantage point from the front as well as from either side of the statue. Nonetheless, it was only after the excavation of the *Laocoön* that Michelangelo came up with the solution visible in the present, unfinished sculpture.

The powerful expressiveness of Michelangelo's present apostle is defined by the physical twisting of the body; this dramatic change from drawing to sculpture is based, in part, on the *Laocoön*. The artist maintained the block upon which the apostle's foot rests from the earlier drawings, however now the *St. Matthew*'s torso moves in opposition to his lower extremities and the resulting *figura serpentinata* terminates in the powerful thrown-back head.<sup>35</sup> Michelangelo's *St. Matthew* captures the intense *contrapposto*, tension, expressiveness, and movement that derived from his study of the Hellenistic prototype. The apostle's pose reveals his divine epiphany through invigorated action.

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<sup>33</sup> For those who accept the present statue as dated after the discovery of the *Laocoön*, see footnote 28. Michaël J. Amy discusses the literature regarding the various dating of the statue, *Michelangelo's Commission for Apostle Statues for the Cathedral of Florence*, Ph.D. dissertation (New York University, 1997): 730-36.

<sup>34</sup> The development of the saint's *figura serpentinata* pose could, in part, have been influenced by Leonardo da Vinci's work. Michelangelo, however, developed a more vigorous, athletic pose for the saint that superseded Leonardo's graceful figures, see Goffen: 165-166

<sup>35</sup> St. Matthew's action was described by Giovanni Lomazzo as a *figura serpentinata* in 1584, *Trattato dell'Arte dell Pittura, Scoltura et Architectura*, (Milan, 1584), cited in Amy: 493 note 2.

The commission for the Florence Cathedral was never finished, and Michelangelo left the *St. Matthew* incomplete in 1508 when Pope Julius II summoned him back to Rome to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Over the course of the ceiling's creation, Michelangelo produced numerous monumental figures based on the forms of the *Laocoön* group and the *Belvedere Torso*.<sup>36</sup> Michelangelo used the *Laocoön*'s two sons as models for some of the *ignudi* placed at the edges of the Sistine Ceiling's nine narrative panels, where the heroic nudes coil and contort as they wrestle with swags and bunches of drapery that support ten bronze medallions depicting Old Testament stories. The closest visual connection between the nudes and the ancient statue are found in the two *ignudi* that frame the ceiling panel of the *Drunkenness of Noah* and are above the Prophet Isaiah (Fig 8). The left *ignudo* reverses the action of *Laocoön*'s right son, as the nude lowers his chest over his right leg while turning his head in the opposite direction. The dynamic action is further strengthened by the nude's right arm supporting the garland in a similar position to the son's right arm.

When Michelangelo designed the pendentive spandrel for the *Brazen Serpent* (Fig. 9), the *Laocoön* was again employed as a model. Here, both the myth of *Laocoön* and the ancient statue are relevant. The story, as told in Virgil's *Aeneid*, offered an analogous narrative to the Biblical text, emphasizing humanity's perpetual battle with fate, embodied in both cases by serpents.<sup>37</sup> In Numbers 21:4-19 the story of the Brazen Serpent is told, where God punishes the rebellious people by casting serpents upon them.

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<sup>36</sup> Aldo Foratti, "Gli Ignudi della volta Sistina," *L'Arte* 21 (1918): 109-118; see also, Tolnay; *Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling*, Volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945): 65.

<sup>37</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, edited and notes by R.D. Williams (London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1972): Volume I, Book II, 199-231.

The Trojan priest, who in Virgil's account was killed with his two sons after warning the Trojans against the wooden horse, shared the same fate. The biblical story, paralleling the fate of the Trojan priest, was interpreted as an Old Testament prefiguration of Christ's Final Judgment.<sup>38</sup> This connection between the ancient and biblical narratives would have been immediately apparent to a sixteenth-century audience.<sup>39</sup>

The statue offered Michelangelo three different figures that could be used in this scene. The sinners scream out as they twist and turn, attempting to defend themselves from the falling serpents that devour their flesh. The spandrel's central figure reaches back to remove the snake from around his waist. His action and the psychological torment expressed by his thrown back head recalls the *Laocoön's* central figure. Michelangelo's representation of snakes coiling around the bodies of the infidels departs from precedence, and clearly reflects figural types evolved from the *Laocoön*.<sup>40</sup>

The *Laocoön's* fluctuating and unstable position is again evoked in the figure of Jonah (Fig. 10), the last prophet painted on the ceiling. By recalling the statue's formal qualities, Michelangelo dramatically expressed the prophet's miraculous rebirth from the whale. The seated Jonah leans back, supported by his right arm, and looks over his left shoulder. His movement forms an elegant s-curve, as his left leg thrusts out, body falls back and his head lifts up to his left, an action not far removed from the *Laocoön's* central figure. Jonah's gaping mouth is analogous to Laocoön's own expression, which

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<sup>38</sup> Tolnay (1945): 98.

<sup>39</sup> It should be remembered that there is a figure in the lower right corner of the *Last Judgment's* lower right corner, who is wrapped in serpents. Vasari identifies him as Pope Paul III's assistant, Biagio da Cesena, in the guise of Minos, 692. In the context of the altar wall, Michelangelo uses the snakes to signify this figure as the anti-hero, or more appropriately as the "anti-*Laocoön*."

<sup>40</sup> A. Springer was the first to make the connection between the scene and ancient statue, *Raffael und Michelangelo*, third ed., (Leipzig, 1895): 18; Tolnay notes that the representation of the serpents coiling around the bodies had not been seen in earlier works of the subject, such as Bellano's and Riccio's relief in the Choir of St. Antonio in Padua, (1945): 65

suggests the divine vision of his predetermined course. Jonah, the only prophet to acknowledge the Biblical narrative above, fixes his eyes on the first panel, *God the Father Separating Light from Dark* (Fig. 4).

This scene, like no other in the chapel, demonstrates how Michelangelo developed the *Laocoön*'s example of tension defined by movement. Following the account in the book of Genesis 1:1-5, Michelangelo depicts God the Father ripping the two fields open in one powerful act, and thus establishing the presence of human time. God the Father is cut off at the knees as he penetrates the frame from the left side. His right leg extends forward and across his body, while his torso turns back against the direction of the right leg, forming a *figura serpentinata*.<sup>41</sup> The throwing back of his head emphasizes God the Father's twisting motion, a dramatic device inspired by the *Laocoön*.

Over the course of next two decades, Michelangelo's interest in the *Laocoön* seems never to have left him. He elaborated upon the ancient model in different ways, exploiting both psychological and formal elements of the statue. A sheet from ca. 1530 in the Windsor Castle Collection depicts three of the twelve labors of Hercules (Fig. 11).<sup>42</sup> It demonstrates Michelangelo's continued interest in ancient mythological narratives and is consistent with other works associated with the presentation drawings made for Tommaso de' Cavaliere.<sup>43</sup> The three sketches follow the Herculean chronology from left to right, depicting Hercules killing the Nemean lion, the conflict with Antaeus, and the

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Barolsky, *Michelangelo and the Finger of God*, (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, 2003): 72-74.

<sup>42</sup> For the dating of the drawing and its attribution, see Bernard Berenson, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, Vol. II (London, 1903): no. 1611; Tolnay, *Michelangelo: The Medici Chapel*, Volume III (Princeton, 1948): 185; A.E. Popham and Johannes Wilde, *The Italian Drawings of the XV and XVI Centuries in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1949): 246-248; Hirst (1988): 110-111; and Paul Joannides, *Michelangelo and His Influence: Drawings from Windsor Castle*, (Washington and London: National Gallery of Art and Lund Humphries Publishers, 1996): 80.

struggle with the multi-headed Hydra. The tripartite arrangement allows Michelangelo to depict the same character in three views: frontally, in profile, and in three-quarters view. Each vignette has been linked to visual sources available to the artist.<sup>44</sup> Similar to the Sistine ceiling *Brazen Serpent* spandrel, Hercules wrestling the serpentine Hydra was influenced by the *Laocoön*'s form and subject. Michelangelo's aged Hercules is a figural type developed from the ancient statue's central figure. Hercules's lower extremities are thrown to the right, an action that is countered by the leftward turn of his torso. His outstretched right arm grasps the neck and repels one of Hydra's seven head. Hercules's left arm is poised to strike with a club, and is in a position that mirrors the *Laocoön*'s right arm. Michelangelo used the *Laocoön* to tell an analogous mythic narrative, one which reverses the Trojan priest's struggle, transforming the battle with serpents into a heroic achievement over the embodiment of evil, the Hydra.<sup>45</sup>

Around 1539 Michelangelo produced a drawing of a crucifix for Vittoria Colonna (Fig. 12) that revives an earlier tradition of Christ alive on the cross. This theme is a visual interpretation of the passage in Matthew 27:46, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>46</sup> Here, Michelangelo translated the *Laocoön*'s pathos into a deeply devotional image. Christ's Laocoönian torso is centered on the cross's axis, as his left shoulder falls down and forward as his right is thrown back. He looks upward with his head thrown back and his mouth agape, repeating an agonizing facial expression likened to the Trojan priest. The two flanking angels that express the grief felt by heaven and earth reinforce Christ's torment upon the cross. The left angel clenches the side of his

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<sup>43</sup> Hirst (1988): 110.

<sup>44</sup> See Popham and Wilde (1949) for a list of Michelangelo's visual sources: 247.

<sup>45</sup> Hirst (1988): 110.

face and looks towards the earth, as it extends its left arm towards Christ in a gesture of supplication that parallels the *Laocoön*'s right son. The right angel grasps its head with both hands as it gazes towards Christ. Its hair type and facial features resemble *Laocoön*'s left son. Michelangelo's infusion of the angel with vigor and an easily recognizable pathos was developed in part from the ancient statue, and is perhaps why Vittoria Colonna felt the drawing "crucified all other images of the crucifixion."<sup>47</sup>

Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna exchanged letters frequently while in Rome. Of the five surviving letters from Vittoria to the sculptor, three mention this drawing.<sup>48</sup> In one letter, she describes her examination of the drawing with a magnifying glass and a mirror. It is difficult to determine what she meant by examining the drawing 'with the aid of mirror,' however, it has been suggested that she was analyzing those qualities of Michelangelo's draftsmanship that are more apparent when the image is inverted.<sup>49</sup> This tendency, to study a pose in reverse, has significance for Michelangelo's own use of the *Laocoön* in the *Last Judgment*.

Over time the *Laocoön* became something of a fixture in Michelangelo's artistic vocabulary. Michelangelo was in Florence between 1519 and 1534, far from the *Laocoön*. Yet the last Florentine work prior Michelangelo's final departure from Florence in 1534, the New Sacristy program at San Lorenzo, exemplifies how the artist connected the entire space by evoking the *Laocoön*'s tripartite composition, a unique use of the

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<sup>46</sup> For discussion of the drawing, see L. Goldscheider, *Michelangelo Drawings*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1951): 53-55, cat. 113; Tolnay (1960), 195-6; and Hirst (1988): 117-118.

<sup>47</sup> Giovanni Poggi and Paola Barocchi, eds. *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*, Vol. IV (Florence: Sansoni, 1979): 104.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 101, 104, 105.

<sup>49</sup> Goldscheider notes that this was a common practice amongst painters to use mirrors to detect errors in draftsmanship. In addition, he suggests that a mirror can be used to obtain a greater concentration of light in order to see the drawing surface, 54 note 109. See also Maria Ruvoldt, "Michelangelo's Dream," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 86.

ancient sculpture.<sup>50</sup> The funerary chapel was commissioned in May 1519 and work continued until the artist left Florence. Michelangelo was responsible for the chapel's construction, as well as for the interior decoration. The two opposing sidewall tombs were to be the final resting places for the two Medicean *Capitani*, Giuliano (1479-1516) and Lorenzo (1492-1519). The double tomb on the entrance wall was to house the remains of the *Magnifici*: Giuliano (1453-1478) and his older brother, Lorenzo (1449-1492). A drawing in the Louvre (Fig. 13) is now considered an authentic portrayal of Michelangelo's design for the *Magnifici* double tomb, reflecting part of the design submitted to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in November 1520.<sup>51</sup>

Over the course of the project, Michelangelo was called to Rome several times and it appeared the sculptures would never be finished.<sup>52</sup> At the patron's request around 1530 Michelangelo hired additional sculptors to assist in the chapel's execution.<sup>53</sup> The double tomb on the entrance wall was a result of such collaboration between the artist and his assistants. Michelangelo carved the *Madonna and Child* (Fig. 14), while his assistants, Giovanni Montorsoli and Raffaello Montelupo, executed the flanking saints, Cosmas and Damian, based on Michelangelo's designs.<sup>54</sup> The *St. Damian* (Fig. 15), carved by Raffaello Montelupo, holds his attribute, a medicinal bowl, in his raised left

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<sup>50</sup> Although Michelangelo was in Florence for fifteen years, it needs to remember that he made no less than three trips to Rome between 1532 and 1534. See Chapter III for further discussion.

<sup>51</sup> The drawing was once considered a patsche, but was related to Michelangelo's original idea by Tolnay and Paul Joannides, see Charles de Tolnay, "Nouvelles remarques sur la chapelle Médicis," *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 73 (1969): 65-80; and Paul Joannides, "Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: Some New Suggestions," *Burlington Magazine* 114 (1972): 541-551. A similar drawing exists for the *Capitani* tombs, see Kathleen Weil-Garris Posner, "Comments on the Medici Chapel and Pontormo's Lunette at Poggio a Caiano," *Burlington Magazine* 115 (1973): 641-649.

<sup>52</sup> William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 130.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the hiring of the assistants, *ibid.*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Acidini Luchinat, "Michelangelo and the Medici," in *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002): 14.

hand.<sup>55</sup> Similar to the *Laocoön*'s right son, Damian turns his head towards the center, while he lowers his left shoulder. On the left side of the Madonna, *St. Cosmas* (Fig. 16) conveys his devotional fervor through his furrowed brow and mouth slightly opened, details that are based on the central figure of the *Laocoön* group. The saint's torso turns out towards his right as he looks to the left, an element that can be traced back to the *St. Matthew* for the Florence Cathedral. Cosmas's exaggerated pose parallels the dynamic twisting of the Christ Child seated on the Virgin's lap. The Christ Child's legs are positioned forward as he turns around to his left, completely hiding his face from the viewer. He desperately attempts to grasp his mother's neck as the Virgin reluctantly presents him to the viewer. She looks past the Christ Child to the altar, symbolic of his eventual sacrifice. Her pose and action foreshadow formal elements found in the Virgin at Christ's side in the *Last Judgment*.

In addition to these formal elements evocative of the *Laocoön*, the overall arrangement of all three statues is borrowed directly from the antique model. The saints frame either side of the *Madonna and Child*, all three together forming a pyramidal composition. Their movements and gazes direct the viewer towards the center. *St. Cosmas* looks up towards the Virgin, who is seated on a slightly taller block. The saint's right foot rests upon a small block, and he shifts his weight towards the center. His turned head and bent right arm further emphasize the movement towards the figure of the Virgin. The Virgin's weight rests upon her left hip, thus opening her right side to the saint. The relationship is analogous to the position of the left son to the Trojan priest.

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<sup>55</sup> The seated pose of the *St. Damian* is more akin to Michelangelo's *Moses* c. 1515, which both share a hand resting on their laps, and the turning their heads in profile. Although Michelangelo supplied Raffaello Montelupo with the designs for the sculpture, Montelupo may have deliberately evoked Michelangelo's *Moses* as a demonstration of his virtuoso as a sculptor.



Serving as the counterpart to *St. Cosmas*, *St. Damian* raises his left leg and looks over his right shoulder. His outstretched left arm holds his attribute in a position that mirrors the extended arm of *Laocoön*'s right son. The statue of *St. Damian* closes the right side of the composition. Although the three statues are physically separated, they are unified through Michelangelo's evocation of the *Laocoön*'s intense emotion and composition.

As the Louvre drawing of the *Magnifici* tomb indicates, Michelangelo intended to place the *Madonna and Child* in the center, over the two sarcophagi, with the Medicean patron saints, Cosmas and Damian, flanking either side. According to the drawing, the three statues would have been the focus of the second register, and formed a tripartite composition across the physical space between the niches. Unlike the *Laocoön* model, which is a single sculpture comprising of three figures, the Madonna group is three separated sculptures that visually maintain the intense emotion of the ancient prototype by the use its formal qualities. Although the planned architecture was never executed for the entrance wall, it must be assumed Michelangelo had still envisioned the wall complete with niches, similar to the extant wall tombs.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, another presentation drawing in the Louvre (Fig. 17) indicates Michelangelo had intended each *Capitani* to have accompanying sculptures on either side. Similar to the entrance wall plans, each wall tomb would have had a tripartite composition on the second register.

That the two idealized portraits of Guiliano and Lorenzo de' Medici contain formal elements relating to the *Laocoön* further support this suggestion. The statue of Guiliano (Fig. 18) is seated upon a non-descriptive stone block with his right leg projecting forward. The left leg is drawn back to stabilize his pose, evocative of

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<sup>56</sup> Luchinat states at the time of Michelangelo's departure from Florence in 1534, Tribolo, his student was given instructions to place the three statues in their present place, 15.

*Laocoön's* active seated position. The forward movement of his left shoulder calls attention to his skin-tight cuirass, which defines his classically inspired torso. The *Capitano's* pose and torso are the flaccid inversions of the *Laocoön's* exertive action. The portrait of Lorenzo (Fig. 19) contains little suggestion of elements connected to the Hellenistic sculpture. However, the mere fact that the sculpture is a seated figure in the center of a tripartite composition might have been enough to maintain the integrity of Michelangelo's interpretation of the *Laocoön*.

Michelangelo left Florence for the last time in 1534. The Medici Chapel served as Michelangelo's proving ground not only for using the form of the *Laocoön*, but demonstrated how the ancient statue's composition could unify the most visually important group, the *Madonna and Child with Sts. Cosmas and Damian*. Although the group's composition was to be separated by the physical space of the architectural elements, the group was brought back together by Michelangelo's evocation of the *Laocoön's* tripartite composition and intense emotional interaction. It would be this same conception that Michelangelo would use to visually connect the *Last Judgment* with the earlier Sistine Chapel ceiling.

## CHAPTER II

### CHRIST AND THE *LAOCOÖN*

Above the altar in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (Fig. 1) explodes from the altar wall and unfolds before the viewer as a cornucopia of human hope and fear. The Elect and Damned souls cower alike, faced with the uncertain fate that awaits them. Centrally placed among the chaos is the controlling figure of Christ, who emerges from a radiant yellowish glow as he orchestrates the final act of his Second Coming. Michelangelo's Christ has a classically-inspired body type drawn from the ancient sculpture, *Laocoön and His Sons*. While Michelangelo's use of the *Laocoön* as a model can be traced throughout his career, the figures of Christ, the Virgin, and the unidentified figure to his left are the clearest quotations of the ancient sculpture's overall form (Fig. 20).

Starting on the left side of the central group, the Madonna (Fig. 21) is positioned under the raised right arm of Christ and is analogous to the left son's position under the Trojan priest's arm (Fig. 22). Surprisingly, the Virgin's pose has more in common with the Hellenistic prototype than with the more commonly identified source, the "Kneeling Venus" type (Fig. 23). This figure does share the same arm position and turning of the head with Michelangelo's Virgin.<sup>57</sup> But the pose of *Laocoön's* son, with his weight carried on his left toes and his right leg is set in front with the right foot touching the left heel, parallels the Madonna's right, as it crosses behind her left leg. She appears to be in

a seated position; her body leans towards Christ, while her head is turned away. Slightly timid and uncertain of her Son's wrath, she looks down over her right shoulder while drawing her arms close to her body. Despite the visual connection of the Virgin's turned head and raised arm to the "Kneeling Venus" type, the Virgin's relationship to Christ can only be explained by the *Laocoön* sculpture. Michelangelo's Madonna is a synthesis of the Venus type and *Laocoön*'s left son. The Virgin appropriately closes the left side of the Christ group, similar in effect to the left son's placement in the antique statue.

However the use of the sculpture did not end there, for the figure of Christ extends the quotation, mirroring the priest in the ancient prototype. Like the Trojan priest, Christ's coiled body and dramatic gestures are off-centered to the left of the fresco's vertical axis. Starting on Christ's left side, Michelangelo duplicated the contour line beginning at the *Laocoön*'s right shoulder. Michelangelo's quotation of the sculpture's central figure is made more apparent by reversing the image of Christ (Fig. 24), a process that was used in the *Crucifixion* drawing for Vittoria Colonna discussed in the previous chapter. The *Laocoön*'s torso rotates towards the viewer with his left shoulder forward, in contrast to the placement of his hips that run parallel to the pictorial plane. The reversed image of Christ depicts the same motion, even to the degree that Michelangelo replicates the break in *Laocoön*'s abdomen at the same point on Christ's torso. The legs of both figures are positioned similarly; one leg bears the weight of the body and the other is outstretched to the side in order to stabilize the pose. Michelangelo even replicated small details of the *Laocoön*: he repeated the gap between *Laocoön*'s first

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<sup>57</sup> Charles De Tolnay first connected the "Kneeling Venus" type with the Virgin, (1960): 113-114. The association is maintained by Barnes (1998): 61.

two toes on his right foot and draped a cloth across Christ's leg in the same position as the snake on *Laocoön's* right leg.

Christ's form, taken from the transposed Trojan priest, establishes a deliberate comparison between the two figures. Their diametric physiognomies and hair types enhance this juxtaposition. *Laocoön's* head extends laterally to his left. His tormented facial expression, with rolled eyes under a furrowed brow and flexed jaw, attests to the psychological agony he is enduring. The undulating coils of his beard and moustache that frame his gaping mouth further accentuate his condition. In contrast, Christ's head is slightly lowered to his left and his expression is controlled though focused eyes and closed mouth. In order to express an opposing psychological state, Michelangelo deliberately contrasts the facial types emphasizing *Laocoön's* loss of control and Christ's effortless reign over the final judgment. Inverting the *Laocoön* priest's defining characteristics, Michelangelo's youthful Christ is a model of control and stability, linked through these ideals to the *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 25).<sup>58</sup> Departing, once again, from previous Last Judgment models, Michelangelo rejects Christ's traditional attributes as a matured, bearded judge with long, straight hair.<sup>59</sup> His Christ appropriates the established attributes of the pagan god Apollo, a youthful, beardless beauty with wavy, yet knotted and controlled hair.<sup>60</sup> Likening the archetype of Apollo to Christ bestows equanimity upon Michelangelo's figure who is simultaneously resurrecting souls and in the act of judging. The contrast between Christ's Apollonian visage and his fleshy, bulky body

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Loren Partridge, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*: An Interpretation," in *Michelangelo: The Last Judgment* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997): 144.

<sup>60</sup> Tolnay suggests that Christ's facial features were inspired by the *Apollo Belvedere*, (1960), 37.

serves to reinforce his divine embodiment in mortal flesh.<sup>61</sup> By opposing Christ's and *Laocoön's* physiognomies, but maintaining congruent actions, Michelangelo inverts the priest's body into the mirrored image of the Son of Man.

Traditional representations of the Day of Judgment emphasized the Virgin's role as the intercessor for humanity. Two sixteenth-century biographers of Michelangelo, Condivi and Vasari, demonstrate how diverse the interpretations of Christ and the Virgin's actions were among the immediate audience. In his *Vite* of Michelangelo, Vasari describes the central group: "In that scene is Christ seated, with a countenance proud and terrible, turning towards the damned and cursing them; not without great fear in Our Lady, who, hearing and beholding that vast havoc, draws her mantle close around her."<sup>62</sup>

Condivi's interpretation of the Christ's actions seems less horrendous:

Above the angels with their trumpets is the Son of God in His majesty, with His arm and mighty right hand raised in the manner of a man who wrathfully damns the guilty and banishes them from His presence to eternal fire; and, with His left hand held out toward His right side, it seems as if He is gently gathering the righteous to Him.<sup>63</sup>

Condivi's description suggests that Michelangelo broke from traditional depictions of the Last Judgment, where Christ's left hand damns and his right resurrects the chosen, as seen in the vault mosaics of the Baptistery in Florence (Fig. 26) and Giotto's *Last Judgment* in the Arena Chapel, Padua (Fig. 27).<sup>64</sup> Michelangelo's Christ does, however, share the same exposed right palm and downward turning of the left as the Christ of the Florentine Baptistery. The apparent confusion of Christ's gestures is one of many

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> Vasari (1996): II, 693. The iconographical meaning of Christ's arms has been debated since the fresco's completion. For a brief history of interpretations, see Leo Steinberg, "Michelangelo's Last Judgment as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America* 65 (1975): 48-63.

<sup>63</sup> Based on the established relationship between Michelangelo and Condivi, it would appear this is close to the way Michelangelo had intended the figure of Christ to be seen. Condivi, 84.

<sup>64</sup> See Tolnay (1960): 23-24

elements that led the contemporary audience to respond negatively to Michelangelo's extraordinary fresco.<sup>65</sup>

The action of Christ's arms was unprecedented; and his gestures serve to connect the central group to the ancient prototype. Valuable insight into how far Michelangelo went to make the connection between the sculpture and Christ can be obtained by looking at Michelangelo's working process. Seven *giornate* comprise of the Christ figure: the right arm, the head, and five for the torso and legs (Fig. 28). In a photograph taken prior to the most recent restoration, the divisions of *giornate* are quite apparent (Fig. 29).<sup>66</sup> As did most painters, Michelangelo often painted the head and other important elements separately from the main bulk of the body.<sup>67</sup> This is seen in many of the figures at the center of the fresco, such as Saints Bartholomew, Lawrence, Peter, and Paul, each of which are comprised of no fewer than three *giornate*. However, the number of *giornate* that make up Christ's upper body suggests that Michelangelo labored more extensively over the figure of Christ, treating each area with equal importance. The upper half of Christ's body is separated by a *giornata* break on the right shoulder that continues to the right side of his neck. The second division extends from his right side, follows his clavicle bone, and terminates on his neck's left side. Interestingly, the division at

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<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of contemporary responses, see Barnes, Chapter 3, "The Last Judgment and the Critics," 71-90. Interestingly, Giovanni Andrea Gilio's used the *Laocoön*, which demonstrated the anguish and pain Christ would have felt on the cross, in an argument against works like Michelangelo's fresco, where Christ's suffering was not shown on his body. Gilio's *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie* (Camerino, 1564) is reproduced in Paolo Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma*, Volume II (Bari: Laterza, 1960-2): 3-115. See Marcia B. Hall, *After Raphael: Painting in Central Italy in the Sixteenth Century*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 190-91.

<sup>66</sup> Gianluigi Colalucci, "The Pictorial Technique," in Francesco Buranelli, ed., *The Last Judgment: The Restoration*, (New York and Novara, Italy: Rizzoli International Publications and Musei Vaticani-Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1999): 71-73.

<sup>67</sup> Fabrizio Mancinelli, "The History, Execution Technique, First Censorship and Restoration Interventions," in Francesco Buranelli, ed., *The Last Judgment: The Restoration*, (New York and Novara,

Christ's right shoulder is analogous to the infamous break on the *Laocoön* sculpture. When the sculpture was discovered, the arm was missing immediately above the raised shoulder and the action unknown.<sup>68</sup> Michelangelo appeared to have struggled with the arm's action, as demonstrated by an early drawing for the figure of Christ now in the Casa Buonarroti, c. 1533 (Fig. 30).<sup>69</sup> The figure, depicted in reverse of the *Last Judgment* Christ, raises his left arm. More clearly than in the final fresco, this drawing derives from the *Laocoön* model. Michelangelo attempted to recreate the action of *Laocoön*'s missing arm by sketching other possible solutions to its position. That the nature of the arm's action was not fully worked out by the time the fresco was begun, became more apparent after the recent cleaning.<sup>70</sup> A number of *pentimenti* are now visible along the bicep of Christ's right arm that extend to his shoulder (Fig. 31).<sup>71</sup>

In the finished fresco, Christ's left arm sweeps in front of his body, while his right arm extends over his head, bending back at the elbow. This action is similar to that of *Laocoön*'s left son, whose left arm reaches across the front of his body, as he attempts to ward off the second snake's bite. Christ and the son also share the raising of the right arm. Like the right arm of the *Laocoön*'s central figure, however, the son's right arm was

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Italy: Rizzoli International Publications and Musei Vaticani-Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1999): 11-13. Also, in the same publication, Colalucci: 70.

<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of the missing arm, see below.

<sup>69</sup> The drawing has been associated with the Christ in the *Last Judgment*, as well as with the series of drawings relating to the earlier project for a Resurrection, c. 1532/33. I believe it to be an early study for the Christ in Judgment based on the downward gaze and semi-seated position that Michelangelo suggests in numerous lines in the legs. For discussion of the drawing, see Paola Barocchi, *Michelangelo e la sua scuola. I disegni di Casa Buonarroti e degli Uffizi*, (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1962): 169-170, n. 136.

<sup>70</sup> Mancinelli, 13-15.

<sup>71</sup> Colalucci states that the right arm and shoulder consists of two corrections and a transfer of the cartoon, 74. For a complete analysis of the restored Christ, see Colalucci; 14-15, 71-75.



also missing when the sculptural group was discovered in 1506.<sup>72</sup> Here again, the missing arm allowed Michelangelo to freely interpret the action.

Almost immediately after the sculpture's discovery, debate arose around the nature of the figure's original arm position. As early as 1510, a solution for the action of the arm was proposed by Jacopo Sansovino, who began a replacement for the missing arm.<sup>73</sup> Shortly after, Bramante conducted a competition among artists in Rome to produce a wax copy of the statue.<sup>74</sup> The early consensus was that the arm was outstretched and paralleled the left leg. The overriding support for the outstretched arm led to Baccio Bandinelli executing a wax arm for the statue. And in the 1520's, Bandinelli replaced Sansovino's early restoration with a wax arm.<sup>75</sup> However, the number of restorations attempted during the next four decades suggests the arm position remained controversial, even after the attachment of Bandinelli's wax arm.<sup>76</sup> There is little indication of how these restorations positioned the arm. However, a terracotta arm modeled by Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli between 1532 and 1533, to replace Bandinelli's arm, depicts the arm bent at the elbow over Laocoön's head.<sup>77</sup> Montorsoli's new arm revived a heated debate over the arm's original Hellenistic position.<sup>78</sup> Michelangelo was certainly familiar with the terracotta addition when he started work on the *Last Judgment*

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<sup>72</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>73</sup> Barkan, 11.

<sup>74</sup> For discussions see Matthias Winner, "La collocazione degli dei fluviali nel Cortile delle Statue e il restauro del Laocoonte del Montorsoli," in Matthais Winner, ed. *Il Cortile delle Statue: Der Statue des Belvedere im Vatikan* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1998): 117-128; Barkan, 9-11.

<sup>75</sup> Hans Henrik Brummer, *The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1970): 87.

<sup>76</sup> Barkan, 9-11.

<sup>77</sup> Brummer, 89; the missing right arm was found in 1905 and reattached in 1958. For a discussion of history of the reconstruction, see Howard, (1959): 365-369; and (1989): 417-422.

<sup>78</sup> Montorsoli's bent arm was indeed the correct position, a fact unknown in the sixteenth-century. It was not until the original arm was discovered in 1905 that the debate was finally put to rest. For a history of the restorations to Laocoön's right arm, see Birgit Laschke, "Die Arme des Laokoon," in Matthais Winner, ed. *Il Cortile delle Statue: Der Statue des Belvedere im Vatikan* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1998): 175-186.

in 1536. It has been suggested that four years later Michelangelo carved a marble arm for the group, for which part of the central figure's right shoulder had been cut back in order to attach the replacement.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps Michelangelo believed the restoration was inadequate based on his study of anatomy and the human figure in action.<sup>80</sup> The connection between the *Laocoön*'s central figure and the frescoed Christ might be read as Michelangelo's own statement regarding the intended position of ancient statue's right arm.

The parallels between the *Laocoön* and the Christ composition are far too many for Michelangelo not to have expected his learned audience to associate the fresco with the sculptural group. But it is the overall use of the sculpture that is, arguably, the most revealing. The body type itself expresses the fundamental elements in the respective stories of Christ and *Laocoön*. As mentioned above, *Laocoön* was the recipient of Divine wrath.<sup>81</sup> In the *Last Judgment* fresco, Christ, in turn, releases his Divine wrath upon humanity. For Michelangelo, the opposing figures represent the act and reaction of sacrosanct judgment.

The quotation of the *Laocoön* group is solidified by the presence of the unidentified figure on the left side of Christ (Fig. 32), who is the closest by proximity to Christ and corresponds to *Laocoön*'s son on the right of the sculpture (Fig. 33). Located directly above the figure of St. Bartholomew, the unidentified figure, like the saint, extends his left arm towards Christ in a gesture of supplication. The replication of the

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<sup>79</sup> Barkan, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Michelangelo's knowledge of anatomy was so well respected that the Florentine *Accademia del Disegno* amended its rules and regulations on July 1, 1563, to include the study and practice of anatomy based on Michelangelo's methods. See Fredrika Jacobs, "(Dis) assembling: Marsyas, Michelangelo, and the Accademia del Disegno," 84 *Art Bulletin* (September 2002): 426.

<sup>81</sup> Howard Hibbard connects Michelangelo's life and art to the *Laocoön*, both of which were the victim of divine wrath; *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974): 91.

arm is a visual device that draws the viewer's attention to the unknown figure. Additionally, the unknown figure mimics Christ's judging gestures with his right arm raised and his left in front of his torso. This action, too, imitates that of *Laocoön's* son, who turns his head and raises his bent right arm towards the center. *Laocoön's* right son and Michelangelo's anonymous figure not only share the same gesture of the right arm, but also share similar hair and facial features. Michelangelo's figure looks directly at the Savior with opened eyes and mouth slightly agape, much as in the same fashion the son gazes towards his father in mute horror and fear, but with hope of salvation.

When the unidentified figure is combined with Christ and the Virgin, the entire group's relationship to the antique sculpture becomes apparent. The unknown figure participates on the same level as the right son of *Laocoön*, and therefore seems to play an equal part in Michelangelo's narrative. Vasari's description of the group around Christ offers one possible explanation of the figure's identification, "There are innumerable figures, Prophets and Apostles, that form a circle about Him [Christ], and in particular Adam and St. Peter, who are believed to have been placed there, one as the first parent of those thus brought to judgment, and the other as having been the foundation of the Christian Church."<sup>82</sup> The vagueness of Vasari's description has lead scholars to believe that he had mistaken the figure of St. John the Baptist for Adam.<sup>83</sup> Although Vasari does not give the exact location of Adam, his description asserts that St. Peter and Adam are both included within the immediate circle around Christ.<sup>84</sup> Given the visual prominence

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<sup>82</sup> Vasari, 693.

<sup>83</sup> Barnes, 73.

<sup>84</sup> Tolnay identifies Adam in the group on the right, in the farthest right corner, based on his aged appearance and the scale of the figure, (1960): 39-40.

of the figure in question, located between St. Peter and Christ, Vasari must have identified this nude figure to as Adam.

Vasari's passage also suggests why Adam was to be included within the group. This theory is further supported by Christ's acknowledgment of the figure through his gaze. According to the Apocrypha book of 2 Esdras 7:70: "He [the Lord] answered me [the seer] and said, 'When the Most High made the world and Adam and all who have come from him, he first prepared the judgment and the things that pertain to the judgment.'" As the passage states, God's final judgment was established through Adam, and it validates Christ's gaze upon the figure and maintains the presence of Adam within the group. Adam's prominent position is further supported by 1 Corinthians 15: 21-22, where his death is intimately intertwined with Christ's resurrection, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being, for as all die in Adam, so all will made alive in Christ." In addition, Christ's role in the Last Judgment has traditionally been interpreted as the second Adam. In 1 Corinthians 15:45, the Apostle Paul interprets Genesis 2:7 ("The first man, Adam, became a living being, the last Adam became a life-giving spirit") as Christ becomes the second Adam on the Day of Judgment.<sup>85</sup> This interpretation solidifies the identification of the figure to Christ's right as Adam.

Once the identification of Adam is established, then the Virgin's placement within the central group reinforces her role as the second Eve. Michelangelo makes this typological connection by visually linking the Virgin with the figure of Eve in the ceiling

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<sup>85</sup> For a discussion, see Maja Weyermann, "The Typologies of Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary, and their relationship to One Another," *Anglican Theological Review* 84 (Summer 2002): 609-626.

panel of the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (Fig. 34).<sup>86</sup> Eve looks back over her left shoulder as she draws her arms close to her head and crosses her hands at the wrists, which are gestures similar to the Virgin's in the *Last Judgment*. The reference to the Virgin as the second Eve, and the inclusion of Adam within the central group, both serve to reinforce the New Testament prophecy of Christ's eventual Second Coming.

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<sup>86</sup> Barnes, 69.

## CHAPTER III

### A TALE BETWEEN TWO CITIES: MICHELANGELO IN FLORENCE AND ROME

Pope Clement VII (Giulio de' Medici, 1523-1534) commissioned the *Last Judgment* while Michelangelo was still in Florence working on the Medici tomb project at San Lorenzo.<sup>87</sup> A letter dated March 2, 1534, describes the pope's desire to have Michelangelo paint the "Day of the Last Judgment" above the altar and the "Fall of Lucifer and his Angels" on the entrance wall.<sup>88</sup> The commission seemed to have come to an abrupt end with Clement VII's death just a few days after Michelangelo's arrival in Rome. At first the pope's death appeared to free Michelangelo from the task of painting the monumental *Last Judgment*. Yet Clement VII's newly elected successor, Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese, 1534-49), promptly took advantage of the situation and resurrected the commission. Vasari relates the now famous words of Pope Paul III, "I have had this desire for thirty years, and now that I am Pope do you think I shall not satisfy it?"<sup>89</sup> The pope, however, reduced the scope of the commission to only the altar wall. This was perhaps a compromise with the artist, who wanted nothing more than to finish the Pope Julius II's tomb project, which had haunted him for nearly thirty years. Pope Paul III also made revisions to the Clementine composition, expanding the altar

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<sup>87</sup> Correspondence between Pope Clement VII and Michelangelo regarding the decoration of the Sistine Chapel walls is documented as early as September 22, 1533. For further discussion see Fabrizio Mancinelli, "The Painting of the 'Last Judgment': History, Technique, and Restoration," trans. by Lawrence Jenkins, in *Michelangelo. The Last Judgment: A Glorious Restoration* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 157.

<sup>88</sup> Condivi only mentions Clement's intention for the altar wall, 75. However, Vasari describes the decoration of the opposing wall as mentioned above: II, 687-688.

<sup>89</sup> Vasari (1996): II, 688.

wall decorations to encompass the two lunettes depicting angels carrying the instruments of Christ's passion.<sup>90</sup>

Based on the dating of the extant drawings, Michelangelo began using the *Laocoön* as a model for the Christ group early in the commission. The earliest drawings were more than likely begun while the artist was still in Florence, where the ancient statue was already being adapted for his work on the Medici tomb project. A drawing (Fig. 35) in the Casa Buonarroti, Florence, generally dated to 1533-34, is perhaps the remnant of the *modello* presented to Pope Clement VII when he visited the artist's studio in 1534.<sup>91</sup> Condivi mentions that Pope Paul III saw the presentation drawing when he had a similar meeting with Michelangelo after he revived the commission.<sup>92</sup> Although areas of the drawing have been traced over with ink by a later hand, the sketch demonstrates Michelangelo's attempt to unify the complicated composition through the figure of Christ. The action of the right arm resembles the final frescoed image of Christ, but Michelangelo is still in doubt as to its exact nature. The drawing's sub-composition is defined by a pyramidal grouping of figures. A figure on the left, who may be Mary based on her proximity and interaction with Christ, moves towards the center with an open-armed gesture, actively interceding on humanity's behalf.<sup>93</sup> The contour formed by her back leads the viewer's eye up towards Christ's head. Christ's gaze, in turn, reverses

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<sup>90</sup> Barnes claims Paul III added the angels in the lunettes, changed the pose of the Virgin, and suggested the reference to Dante in the scene of Hell, (1998): 58.

<sup>91</sup> E. Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, 2 Volumes (Munich, 1901-1905): II, 605, no. 65; Thode, *Michelangelo: Kritische Untersuchungen über seine Werke*, 3 Volumes (Berlin, 1902-1913): III, no. 57; Berenson (1938): no. 1413; Goldscheider (1951): 51-52, #100. Tolnay (1960): 183-184, n. 171; Wilde (1978): 160-161.

<sup>92</sup> "But the Pope [Paul III]...came one day to see him [Michelangelo] at his house...and he wanted to see the cartoon which Michelangelo had made in Clement's time for the altar of the Sistine Chapel:" Condivi, 77. Vasari mentions the same account, however states that Pope Paul III went to Michelangelo's studio to see both the sculptures for the Julius II tomb and the cartoons for the altar wall (1996): II, 689.

<sup>93</sup> Hirst (1988): 51.

the direction of the viewer's gaze, guiding it down the right toward a seated figure, whose hands are clasped in a gesture of devotion. This drawing suggests that Michelangelo experimented with a tripartite composition for the central group early in the Clementine commission.<sup>94</sup>

The figure of Christ in the compositional sketch is almost a mirror image of the drawing in the Casa Buonarroti, from c. 1533 (fig. 30), previously mentioned in the discussion of Christ's right arm.<sup>95</sup> Christ's torso turns in the opposite direction of his lower body, which has been indicated by a series of sketched legs. Each pair of these legs suggests a different potential pose, indicating that Michelangelo was as uncertain about the location for the legs as he was for the position of the right arm. Additionally, the action of the coiled left arm was still in question. The indecision about the placement of the legs and arm suggests this sketch was executed prior to a more developed compositional drawing.

A small sheet in the Uffizi, Florence, (fig. 36) is a more advanced study for the composition.<sup>96</sup> It demonstrates Michelangelo's interest in creating visual tension, dependent upon Christ's actions and the reactions of the judged souls. Pointing to the side of his torso with his left hand, where the lance pierced his side while on the cross, Christ throws his right arm back over his head as he looks down to the left toward the group of souls. Christ's gaze through the stigmata alludes to the story of Doubting Thomas, an exemplum of the Christian truth of Faith, who needed to feel Christ's wound

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>95</sup> I identify the drawing as for the Christ in the *Last Judgment* based on the 1534 date by Tolnay (1960), 178-179, n. 163. However, it also has been associated with Michelangelo's studies of Resurrection figures. For a discussion, see Barocchi (1962): 169-170; Charles de Tolnay, "Morte e Resurrezione in Michelangelo," *Commentari* 15 (1964): 3-20.

<sup>96</sup> For a discussion of the drawing, see Tolnay (1960), 184-185, n. 173; Steinmann, (1901-1905): II, 667, fig. 66; Thode, (1902-1913): III, no. 235; Berenson, (1938): no. 1399 K.



before he would believe that the savior had been resurrected. The figure nestled under Christ's right arm is reminiscent of the "Mary" figure in the Casa Buonarroti compositional sketch. She is closer to Christ and is more clearly in a seated position, leaning toward her Son with arms outstretched. This figure anticipates that of the Madonna in the final fresco, which is evocative of the position of the *Laocoön's* left son.

A sheet in the Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, (fig. 37) represents a more advanced state of the Christ figure.<sup>97</sup> Surrounded by the Elect that encircle the seated Judge, this is the perspectival device that Michelangelo would choose for the final composition. Christ is seated and shifts his weight onto his right side, as he raises his right arm, echoing once more the *Laocoön's* action. His lowered left arm sweeps across the front of his body. The two foremost figures on either side of Christ turn their backs towards the viewer as they await the moment of judgment. The left figure reaches out to Christ, who focuses his gaze upon the right figure completing the triangular sub-composition.

Characteristic of all these composition drawings for the *Last Judgment* is Michelangelo's lack of commitment to a single pose for Christ's right arm. Indeed, Michelangelo never fully reconciled the placement of the arm, even in the final fresco. This indecision is attested in the division of the *giornate* used to fresco the Christ figure and by the number of *a secco* revisions (Fig. 30). As discussed previously, Michelangelo's interest in the arm bears witness to the contemporary discussions in Rome regarding the restorations to the *Laocoön's* lost arm. The artist was asked by Pope

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<sup>97</sup> Goldscheider (1951) states the Bayonne drawing predates the Casa Buonarroti compositional sketch, 51, no. 99 and no. 100. Tolnay (1960), places the Bayonne sketch before the Casa Buonarroti because of Christ's seated pose, 182-183, n. 170. However, based on the more developed Laocoonian features of the Christ in the Bayonne drawing, I place this drawing after the Casa Buonarroti drawing. For a discussion of the drawing, see Steinmann, (1901-1905): II, 665, fig. 64; Thode, (1902-1913): III, no. 512a; Berenson, (1938): no. 1395 B; Hirst (1988): 50-51.

Clement VII to make his contribution to the arm controversy, when on a visit to Rome in 1532.<sup>98</sup> The artist quickly refused, citing his desire to finish the Medici tomb project at San Lorenzo.<sup>99</sup> Michelangelo recommended his assistant, Giovanni Montorsoli, who left Florence in 1532 to carry out the restoration commission, including a replacement for *Laocoön's* right arm.<sup>100</sup>

Michelangelo made no less than three trips to Rome between 1532 and 1534, including a nine-month stay beginning in late summer, 1532.<sup>101</sup> During these years, the artist's activities in Rome included working on designs for Pope Clement VII's *Last Judgment*. It is impossible to say if Michelangelo saw the *Laocoön* during this period, however that may not have been necessary. In 1533, Montorsoli returned to Florence after completing the restorations in the papal statuary collection. It has been suggested that Montorsoli may have taken studies of the *Laocoön* back with him to Florence, although none such studies survive.<sup>102</sup> However, the significance of such drawings is attested to by the discovery of the numerous mural drawings in the basement chamber located under the New Sacristy in San Lorenzo. One of which is an over life-sized depiction of *Laocoön's* head (Fig. 38) dated to after 1533, which has been attributed to either Michelangelo or Montorsoli.<sup>103</sup> The head is depicted from an above-left viewpoint. The drawing's vantage point suggests a position only achieved by an elevated view, and

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<sup>98</sup> Barkan, 11.

<sup>99</sup> Recounted in Vasari's "Life of Montorsoli": II, 535.

<sup>100</sup> For the discussion on the history of the restorations, see Chapter II.

<sup>101</sup> Wallace (1994), 130.

<sup>102</sup> Caroline Elam, "The Mural Drawings in Michelangelo's New Sacristy," *Burlington Magazine* 123 (1981): 601.

<sup>103</sup> Paolo dal Poggetto attributed it to Michelangelo, *I disegni murali di Michelangelo e della sua mella Sagrestia Nuova di San Lorenzo*, (Florence: Centro Di, 1979): 91-93; this was supported by Frederick Hartt, "Michelangelo, the Mural Drawings, and the Medici Chapel," in Craig Hugh Smyth, ed., *Michelangelo Drawings: Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts Symposium Papers, XBII*, (Hanover

thus could only be made by someone who had worked on the sculpture. Scholars who ascribe the drawing to Michelangelo's hand claim it is a "remembrance" sketch, citing Vasari's account of the artist's remarkable ability to remember everything he ever saw.<sup>104</sup> A more likely explanation is that the image is based on Montorsoli's drawings of the statue and that it is, in fact, by the assistant himself.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, the mural drawing dates to a period when Michelangelo was still working in Florence, and when considered in conjunction with the Bayonne drawing, both demonstrate that during the initial design phase for the Sistine altar wall, Michelangelo was reconsidering, at least in part, the ancient sculpture.

In the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo's use of the ancient sculpture was not limited to the inspiration of the human figure in a dramatic action, as offered by the *Laocoön's* central figure, but the artist also alluded to the Laocoön myth in order to connect the theme of divine justice between the ceiling and altar wall. The biblical passages depicted in the ceiling decorations that immediately surround the *Last Judgment* metaphorically allude to Virgil's myth of the *Laocoön*.<sup>106</sup> During the design and execution of the ceiling between 1508 and 1512, Michelangelo emphasized the overarching idea of divine justice through the chosen biblical subjects, each of which is defined in terms of the *Laocoön's* form and type.<sup>107</sup> Virgil recounts that the Trojan priest was a victim of divine justice and was executed by a hoard of sea serpents. The ancient statue depicts the precise moment when the priest and his sons have fully realized their fate at the hand of an angered deity.

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and London: National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992): 196-198. Elam attributes the drawing to Montorsoli, 601.

<sup>104</sup> Poggetto: 91-92; Hartt (1992): 196-198.

<sup>105</sup> Birgit Laschke suggests Montorsoli brought drawings of the *Laocoön* to Florence, and states that the sketches were used for the statue of St. Cosmas, *Fra Giovan Angelo Da Montorsoli*, (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1993): 32-33.

<sup>106</sup> Virgil (1972): Volume I, Book II, 199-231.

This same device is immediately apparent in the form of God the Father in the *Separation of the Light and Dark*, which is directly above the altar wall. Michelangelo depicts the first moment of earthly time as a monumental *tour de force* as God the Father separates the fabric of the cosmos into two fields of black and white. The biblical narrative as told in Genesis 1:3-5 is a prefiguration of the Judgment Day, as God the Father acknowledged Light was righteous, and divided it from Darkness, an allusion to Christ's eventual separation of the Elect from the Damned. The artist's choice for the *Laocoön* as the model speaks not only to Michelangelo's interest in an expression of vigorous movement, but also metaphorically reverses *Laocoön*'s victimized pose to one of supreme authority. The figure of God the Father is the initiator of divine justice, whereas the Trojan priest is its recipient.

The two pendentive spandrels that frame the *Last Judgment*'s upper tier reinforce this divine eschatological type established through the *Laocoön*. The subjects of the *Brazen Serpent* and the *Crucifixion of Haman* (Fig. 39) have traditionally been identified as precursors to the *Last Judgment*.<sup>108</sup> As mentioned previously, the "Brazen Serpent" is evocative of the Laocoönian type, which is appropriate for a scene where humanity is punished by a hoard of serpents. In contrast, the Elect are saved by their faith, which is further emphasized by the adjacent spandrel depicting the "Crucifixion of Haman," an Old Testament story (Esther 7:1-10) that represents evil defeated by the Cross. Seen from the side, Haman's twisted pose, with his arms outstretched and head thrown back is directly influenced by the *Laocoön*'s central figure.<sup>109</sup> Detailed examination indicates

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<sup>107</sup> Tolnay (1945): 182-183.

<sup>108</sup> Tolnay (1945): 96-98.

<sup>109</sup> Portheim first noted the influence of the Laocoon on the pose of Haman, *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* XII (1889): 146. Cited in Tolnay (1945): 181-182.

that Haman's torso is derived from the ancient statue's central figure as seen from the right side (Fig. 40), inasmuch as Michelangelo replicates Laocoön's sunken abdomen. While the lower extremities of Haman's body were taken from the same profile of the ancient prototype, Michelangelo reversed the position of the legs (Fig. 41). Again, he was so precise in reproducing the legs that he even included the break in the toes. Michelangelo's use of the ancient statue allowed the artist to allude to the myth of the Trojan priest, which is analogous to the biblical story of Haman, where God punished those who disobeyed. The crossed wooden stakes, the instrument of Haman's punishment, are later converted into the Cross, a devotional symbol of Christ's achievement over mortal death. This intrinsic meaning of Haman's punishment foreshadows both the damning of souls and the resurrection of the Elect on the Day of Judgment.<sup>110</sup>

The soul's resurrection is established by Jonah (Fig. 10), whose monumental figure separates the two pendentive spandrels above the *Last Judgment*. The Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale (Book of Jonah 1:17-2:10) is the prefiguration of Christ's eventual resurrection, as in Matthew 12:40-42 where the theme of the Last Judgment is related to Jonah's prophecy.<sup>111</sup> After three days and nights of being entombed in the whale's belly, Jonah is miraculously released onto dry land. Jonah's quasi-resurrection anticipates that of Christ's, who after his body was laid in the tomb was raised from the dead on the third day. The Biblical passages draw a close connection to the *Laocoön* myth as told by Virgil. Similar to the Trojan priest, Jonah encountered a sea serpent that threatened his mortal life. However, God the Father saved Jonah,

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<sup>110</sup> Tolnay (1960): 181.

<sup>111</sup> For a discussion, see Barnes: 48.

whereas the Trojan priest fell victim to the sea snakes. This opposing results of each story assists in establishing the inherent theme of Christ's eventual actions in the *Last Judgment*, in other words Christ's division of the Elect from the Damned. The prophet Jonah, whose upward gaze draws the viewer's attention towards the figure of God the Father in the *Separation*, serves as a symbolic link between the *Last Judgment* and the ceiling.

The figures of Jonah, and God as he appears in the *Separation of Light and Dark* immediately above the altar wall, served as prefigurations of the Final Judgment. Michelangelo not only visually connects the altar wall with the adjacent scenes and figures by using the *Laocoön* as a model, but also embeds within this visual association, a thematic one. The overarching theme of preordained judgment between the ancient and biblical narratives establishes a lineage from the God the Father in the *Separation* to Christ the Judge in the *Last Judgment*. As a figure dependent upon the *Laocoön*'s form and type, Christ is the visual incarnation of both the judge and executor of the divine justice. Michelangelo goes beyond mere quotation of the Hellenistic statue, giving the *Laocoön* authority by transposing the statue and its narrative onto Christ's final judgment.

## CONCLUSION

The *Last Judgment* appropriately provided a conclusion to Michelangelo's Genesis fresco cycle not only according to Christian dogma, but also visually through the consistent use of the *Laocoön* as a model throughout the chapel. The *Laocoön* was the inspiration for the dynamic form of God the Father in the *Separation of Light from Darkness*, which is the first panel in the ceiling's narration located directly above the *Last Judgment*. Between the ceiling panel and the altar wall is the seated prophet, Jonah. The prophet's pose is a Laocoönian type that serves to bridge the old frescoes with the new. With the addition of the *Last Judgment*, the Sistine Chapel is transformed into a space that incorporates the past, present, and future of the Christian soul. The viewer, in the presence of the frescoes is, like Jonah, the connection between the two depicted Christian histories. This conception is furthered by the identification of Adam, who was the first mortal to sin, and the first soul to be judged on the day of the apocalypse. Since the Biblical story of Adam is depicted on the middle three ceiling panels, it is of no surprise that Adam is given prominence within the *Last Judgment* as part of the central tripartite composition. When Michelangelo's whole program of the ceiling and altar wall is considered collectively, the *Laocoön* becomes the key to unlocking the full cycle and Michelangelo's expression of the beginning and end of human time.

As with Michelangelo's works prior the *Last Judgment*, the *Laocoön* was the stepping stone to a vast range of possibilities in the depiction of the human form. The

early sources that discuss the *Laocoön*'s discovery stress the presence of Michelangelo at the excavation site suggest that the artist was responsible for the sculpture's resurrection to fame in the sixteenth century. It is through Michelangelo's unique use of the *Laocoön*'s form and type that created a permanent link between the ancient prototype and the artist.

Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* cannot stand on its own as an autonomous work, as scholars like Tolnay have suggested, but is visually and symbolically dependent upon the Sistine ceiling. This relationship is revealed through Michelangelo's innovative use of the *Laocoön* and its symbolic nature, which served to connect the ceiling decorations with the altar wall. Michelangelo respected and admired the ancient statue immensely, but did not slavishly copy the antique sculpture in the *Last Judgment*'s central group. When Vasari discusses the *Last Judgment* in his *Vita* of Michelangelo, the biographer prefaces his visual analysis by stating, "...Michelangelo, standing always firmly rooted in his profound knowledge of art, has shown to those who know enough how they should attain to perfection."<sup>112</sup> Not only does Vasari's statement seem to allude to the artist's use of the *Laocoön* as a model, but also he recognized in his own time that Michelangelo was able to extract more from the statue than its prized formal qualities. Although not separated from this aspect, it was the statue's implicit symbolic meaning that assisted in completing Michelangelo's program within the Sistine Chapel.

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<sup>112</sup> Vasari (1996): II, 691-692.



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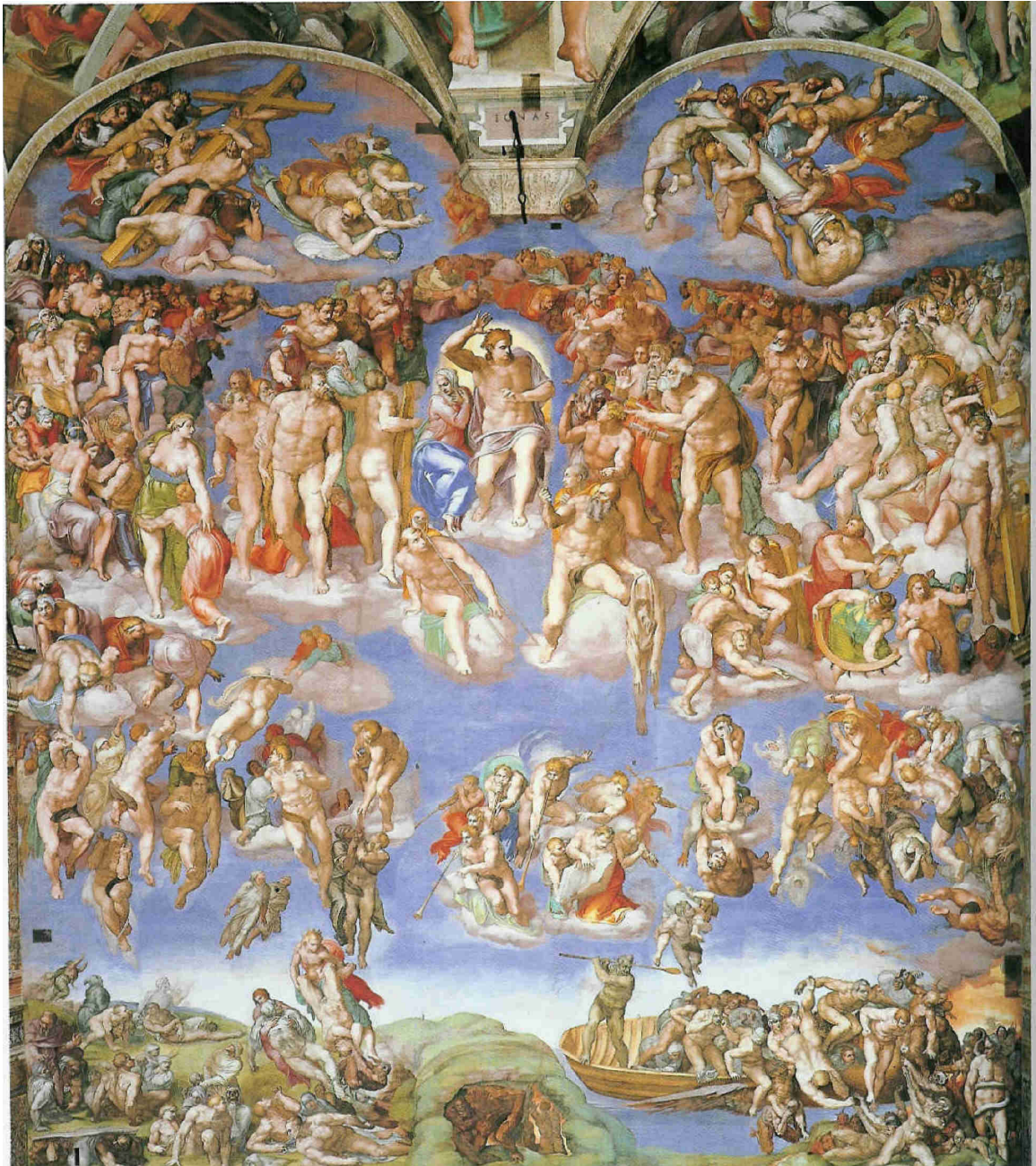
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1. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy



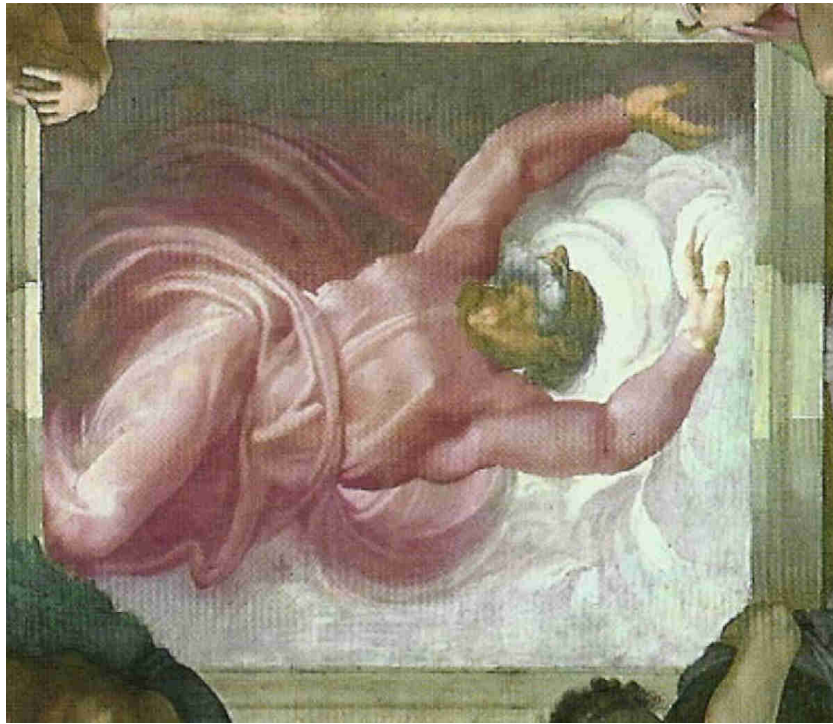


2. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes, *Laocoön and His Sons*,  
First century BCE, Sculpture Court, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican





3. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *St. Matthew*, 1506-8, Museo dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy



4. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *God the Father Separating Light from Dark*, 1508-12, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican, Rome



5. Baccio Bandinelli, Copy of *Laocoön and His Sons*, 1520-25, Uffizi, Florence, Italy

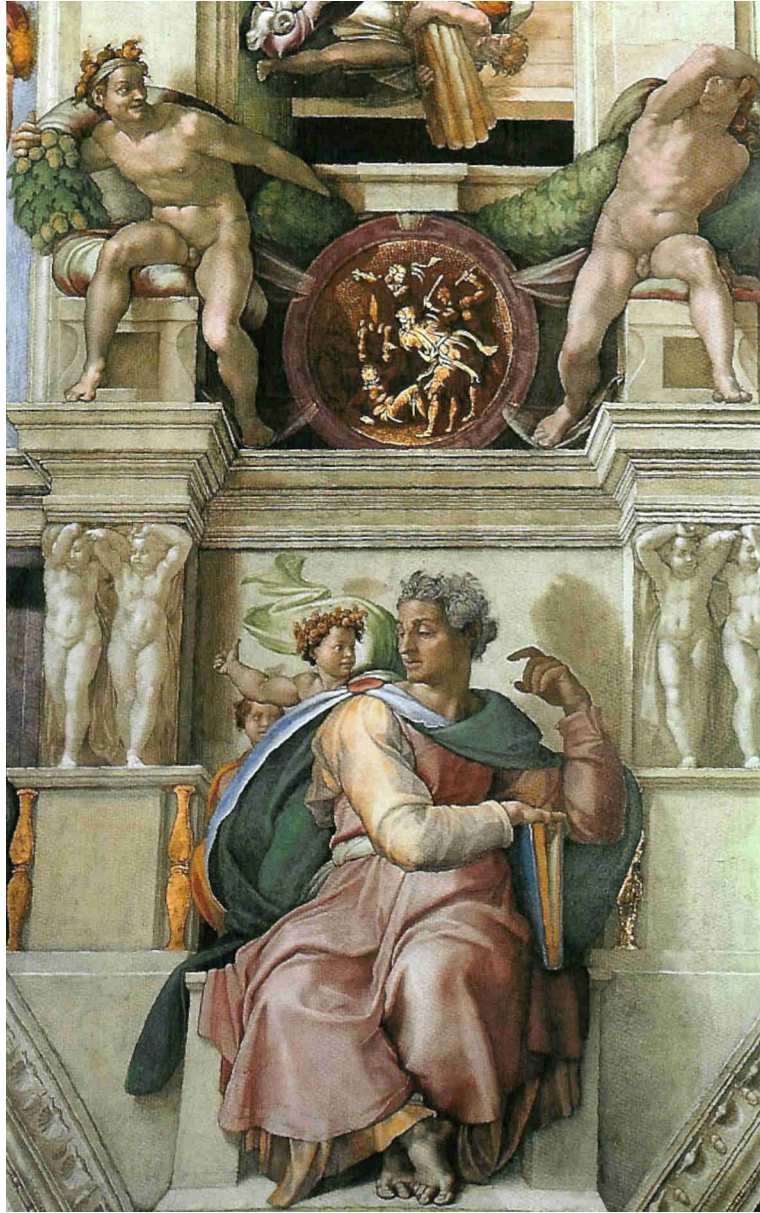


6. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Study for the *St. Matthew*, c.1503-4, British Museum, London

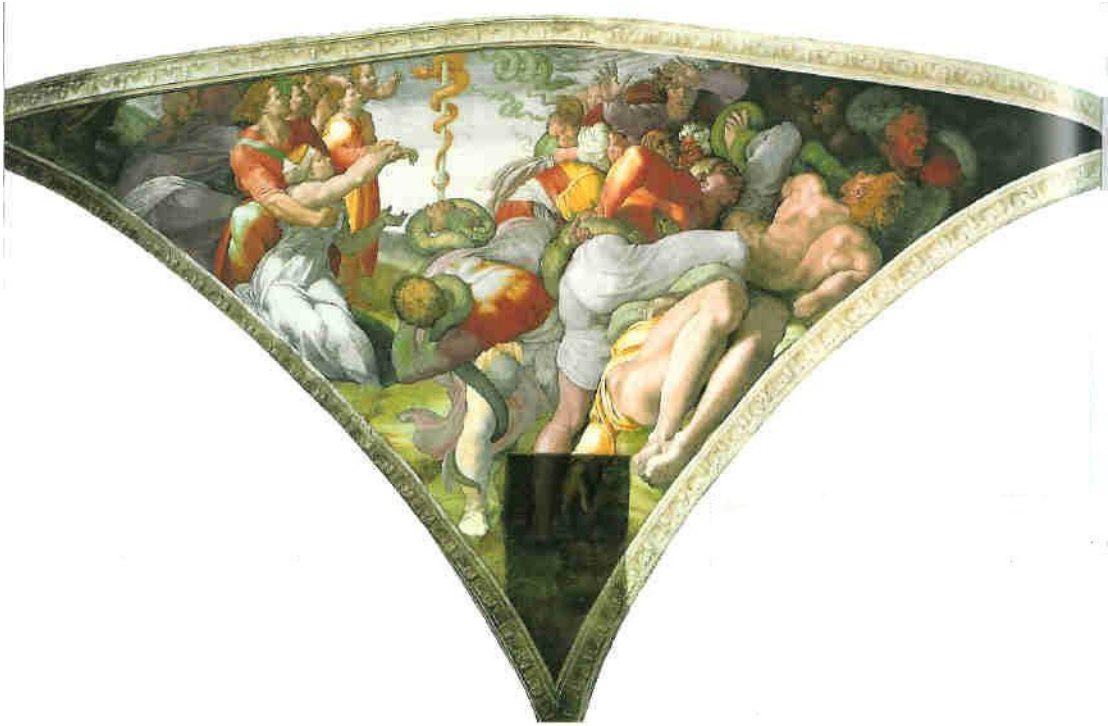




7. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Study for the *St. Matthew*, c.1504, Uffizi, Florence, Italy

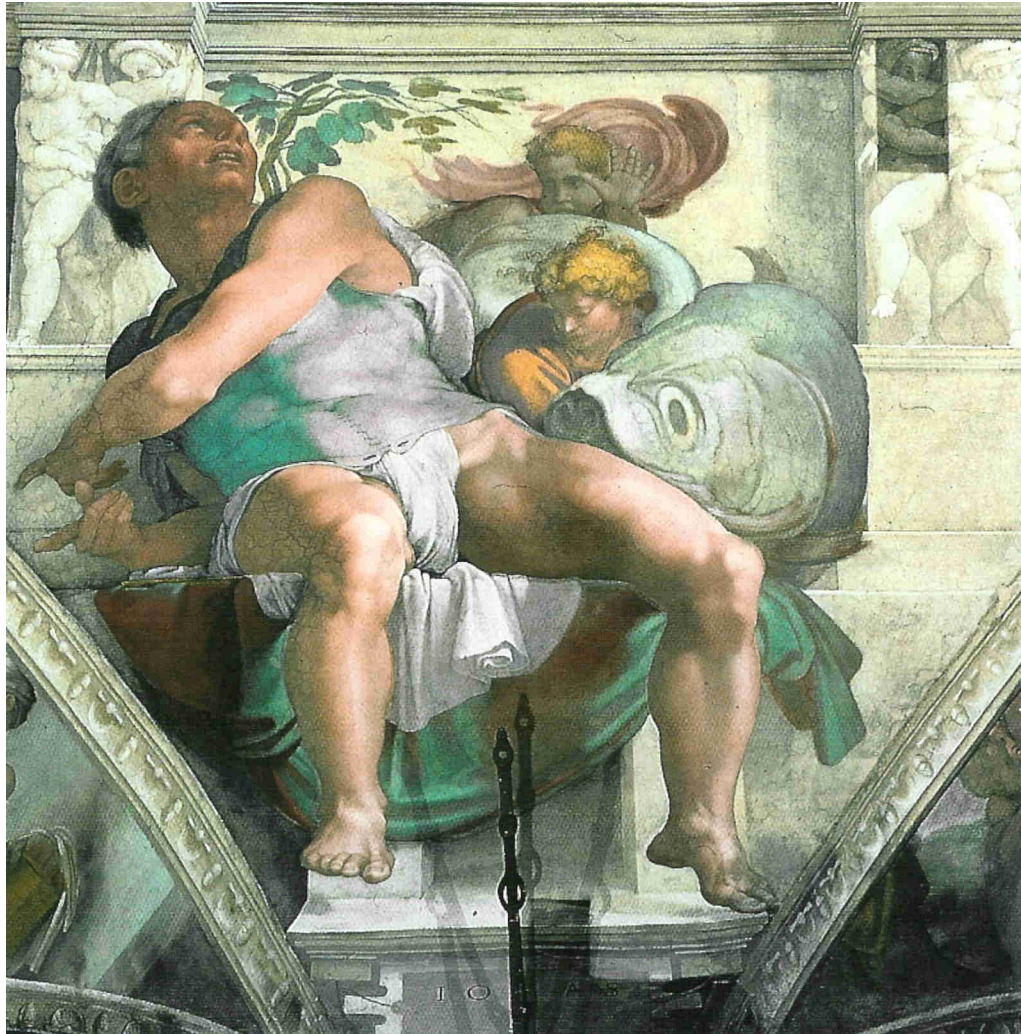


8. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Prophet Isaiah and two ignudi*, 1508-12, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican, Rome



9. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Spandrel of *Brazen Serpent*, 1508-12, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican, Rome



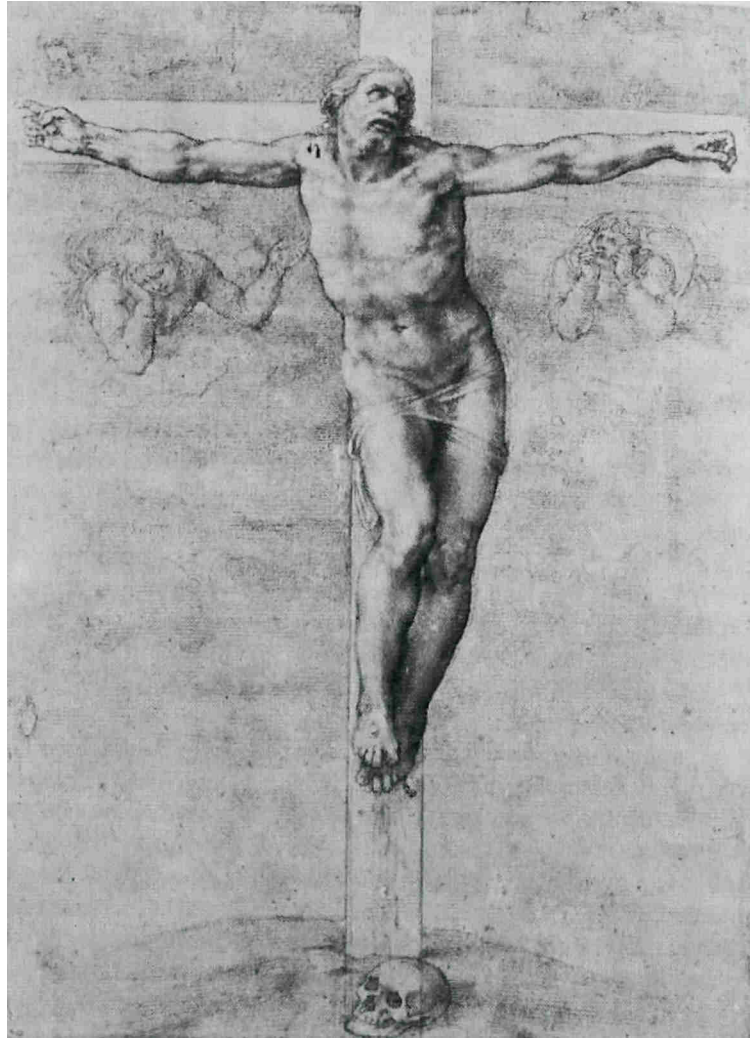


10. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Prophet Jonah*, 1508-12, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican, Rome





11. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Drawing of *Three Labors of Hercules*, c. 1530, Windsor Castle, London



12. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Drawing of *Christ on the Cross*, c. 1539, British Museum, London



13. Attributed to Michelangelo Buonarroti, Presentation drawing for the *Magnifici* Tomb, c. 1521-24, Cabinet des Dessins, Louvre, Paris



14. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Madonna and Child with Sts. Cosmas and Damian*, c. 1521-34, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

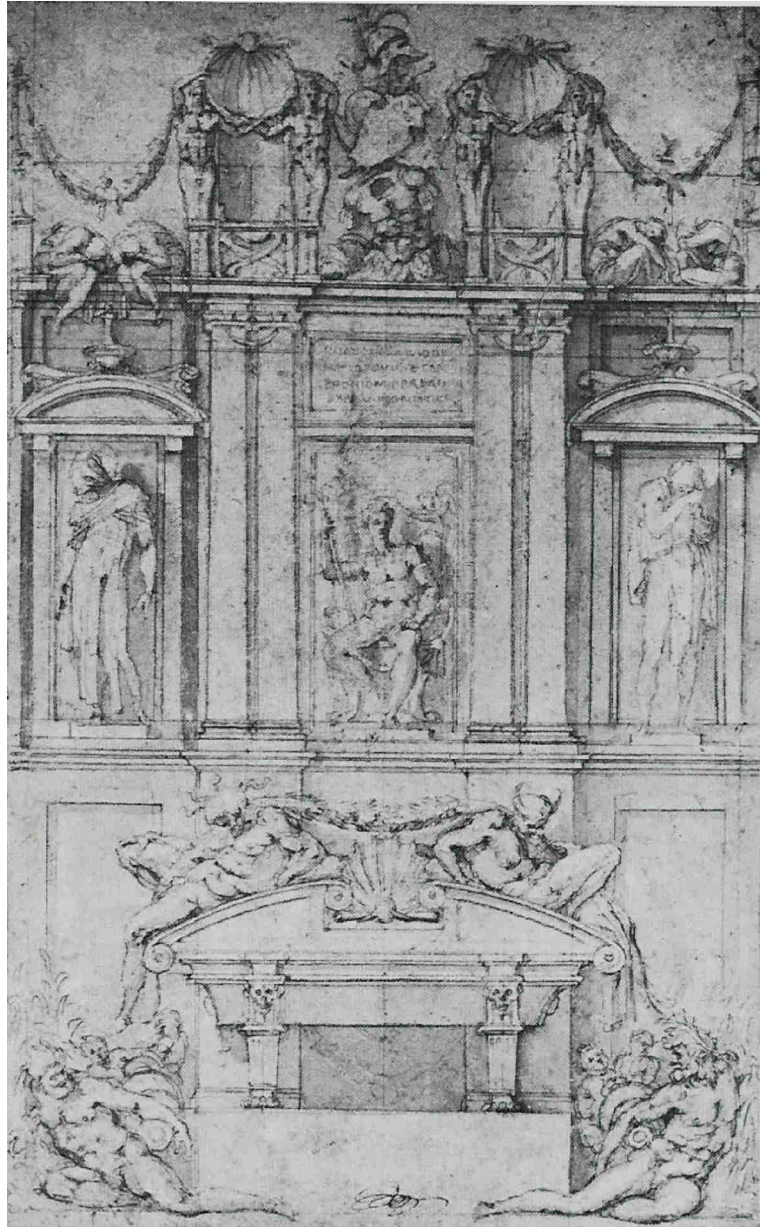


15. Raphael Montelupo based on Michelangelo's design, *St. Damian*, c. 1530-34, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

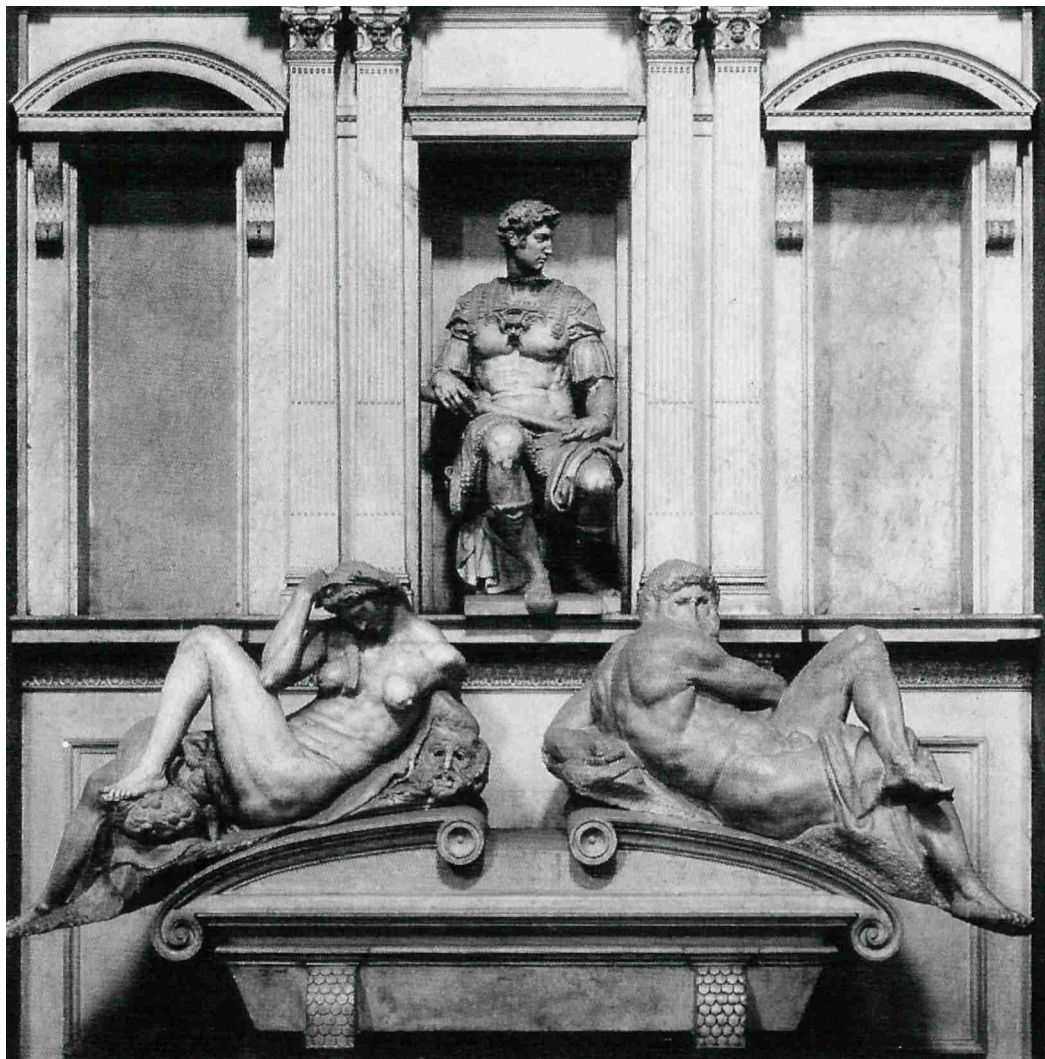


16. Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli based on Michelangelo's design, *St. Cosmas*, c. 1530-34, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy



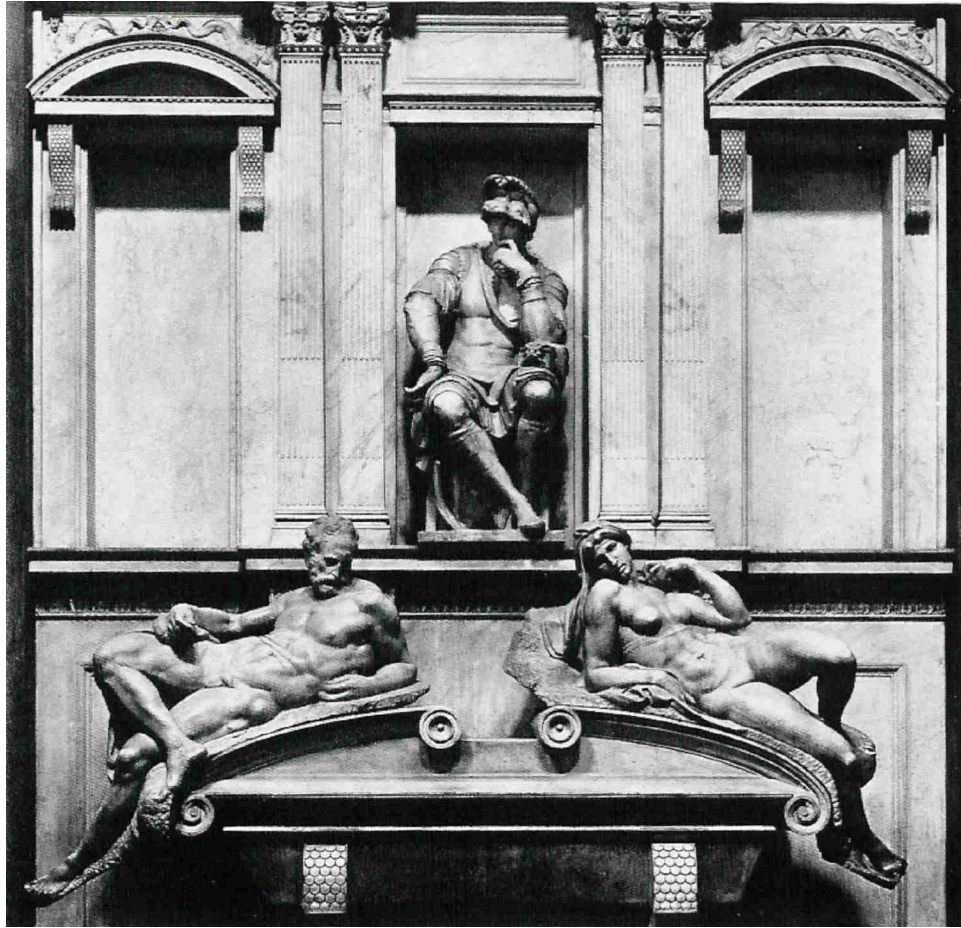


17. Attributed to Michelangelo Buonarroti, Presentation drawing for the *Capitani* Tomb, c. 1521-24, Cabinet des Dessins, Louvre, Paris

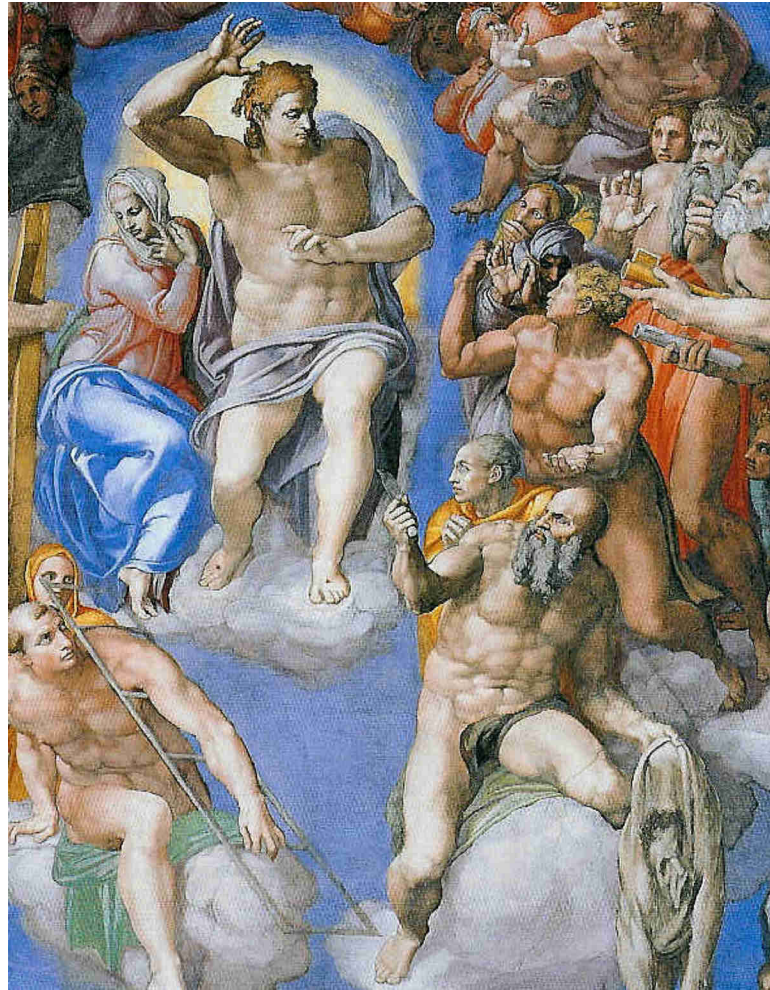


18. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici, 1520-1534, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy.





19. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1520-1534, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy



20. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Central Christ group detail of *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy



21. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Detail of Madonna, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy

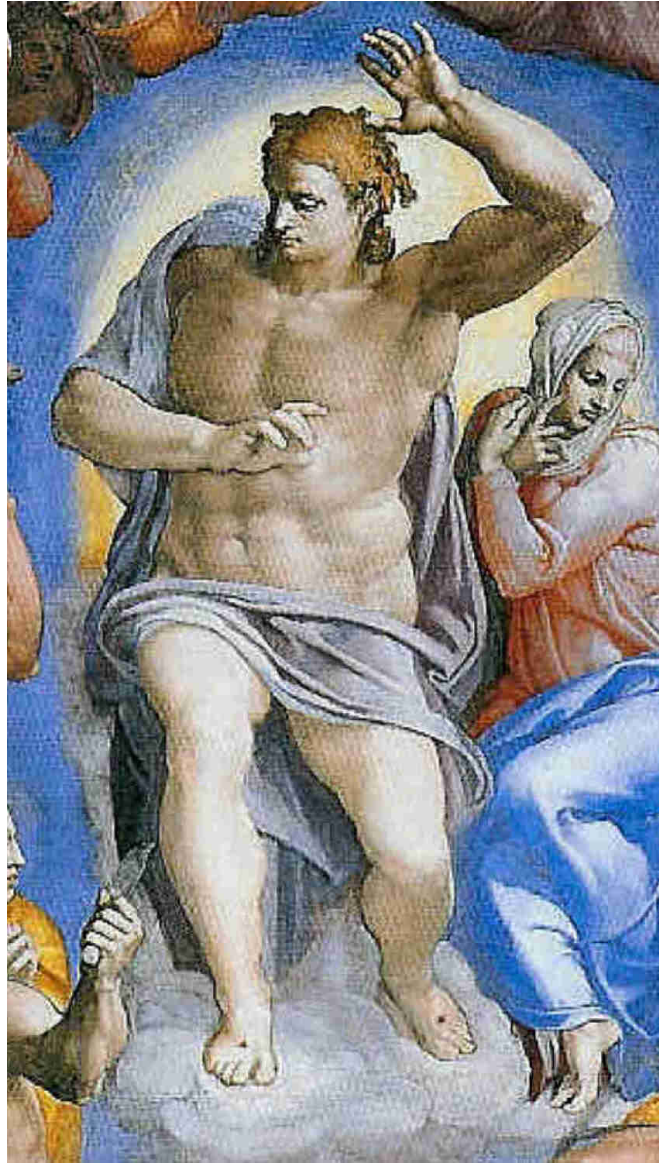


22. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes, Detail of Left Son, *Laocoön and His Sons*, First century BCE, Sculpture Court, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican

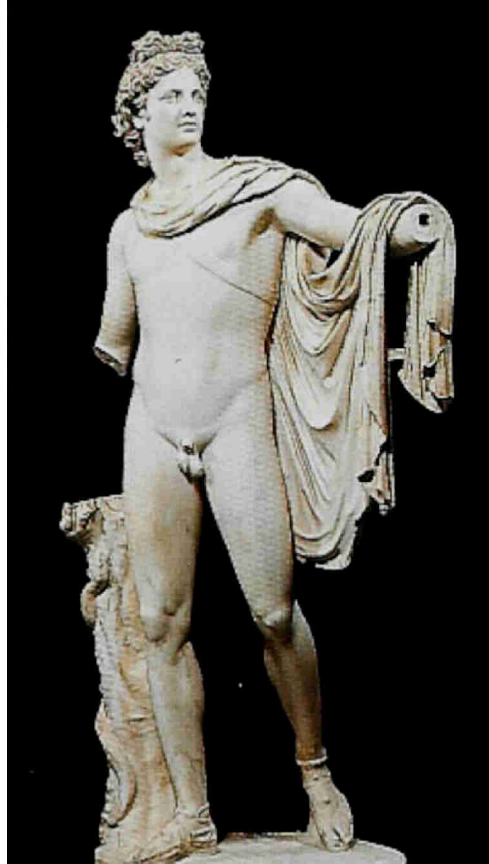


23. Doidalsas, *Crouching Venus*, c. Second half of Third century BCE, Museo Archaeologica, Naples, Italy





24. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Reversed image of Christ, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy



25. Roman copy after Leochares, *Apollo Belvedere*, c. 117-38 CE Sculpture Court, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican

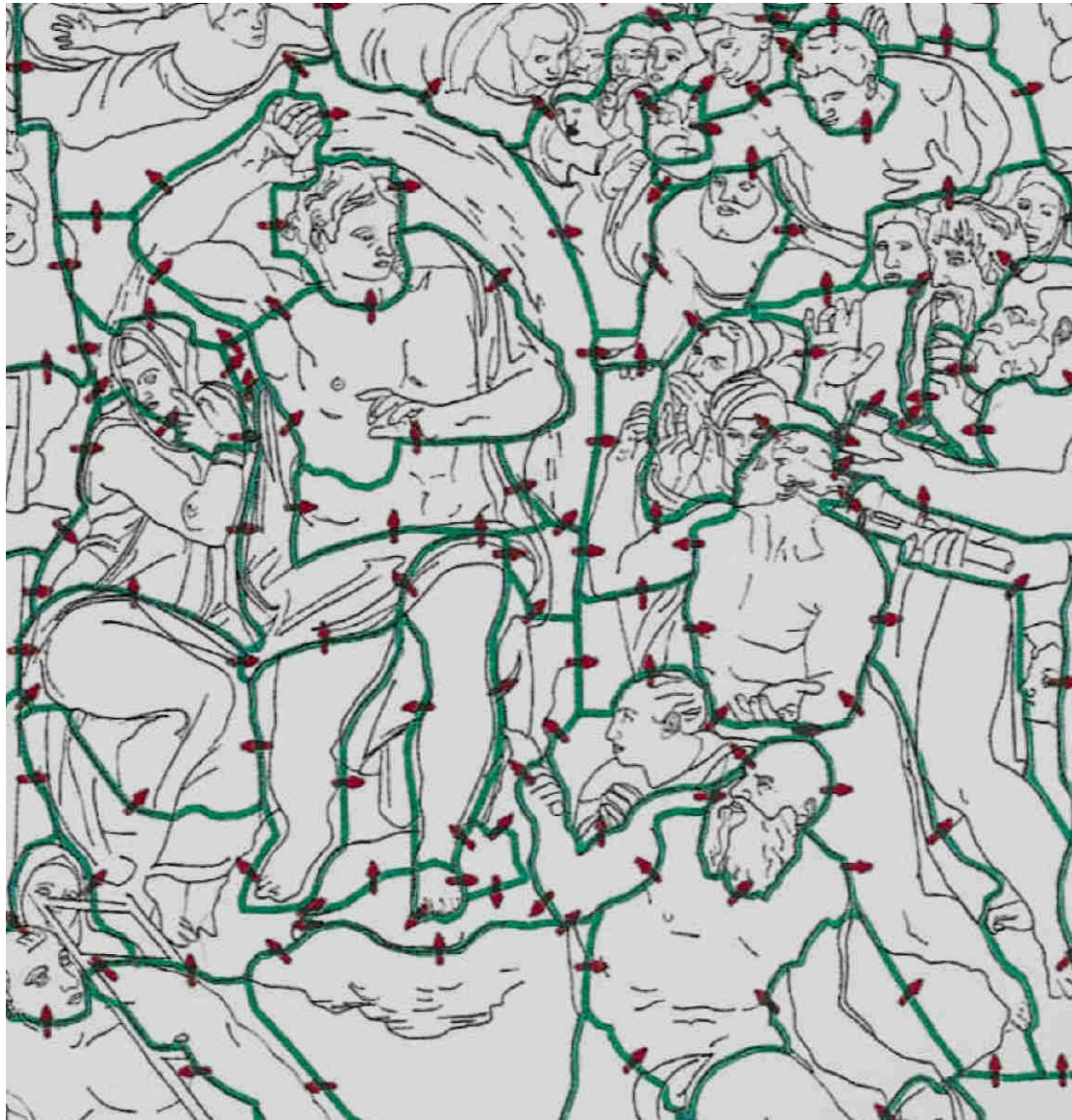


26. Mosaics of *Last Judgment*, thirteenth through early fourteenth centuries, San Giovanni Baptistery, Florence, Italy



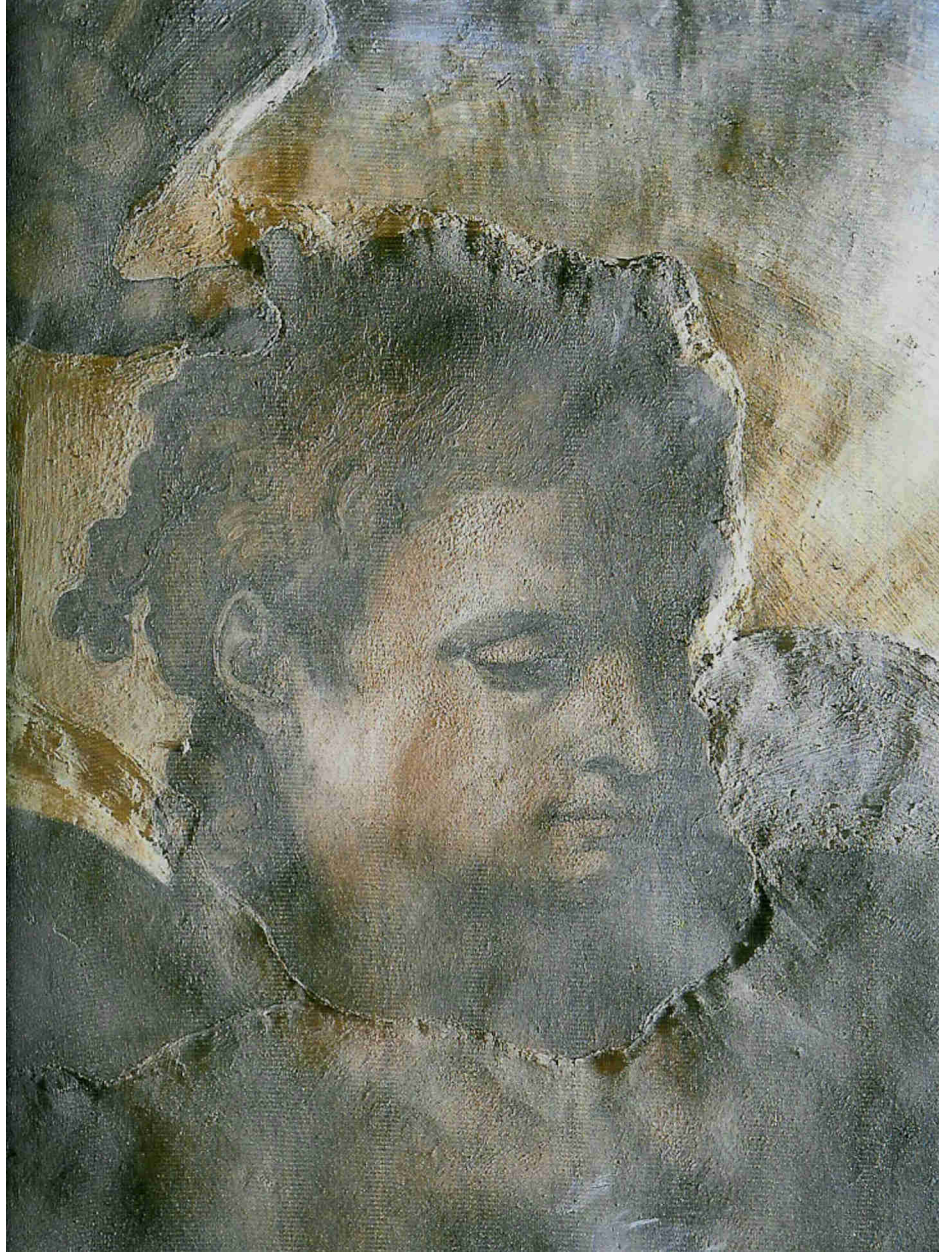


27. Giotto, *Last Judgment*, 1303-1306/8, Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy

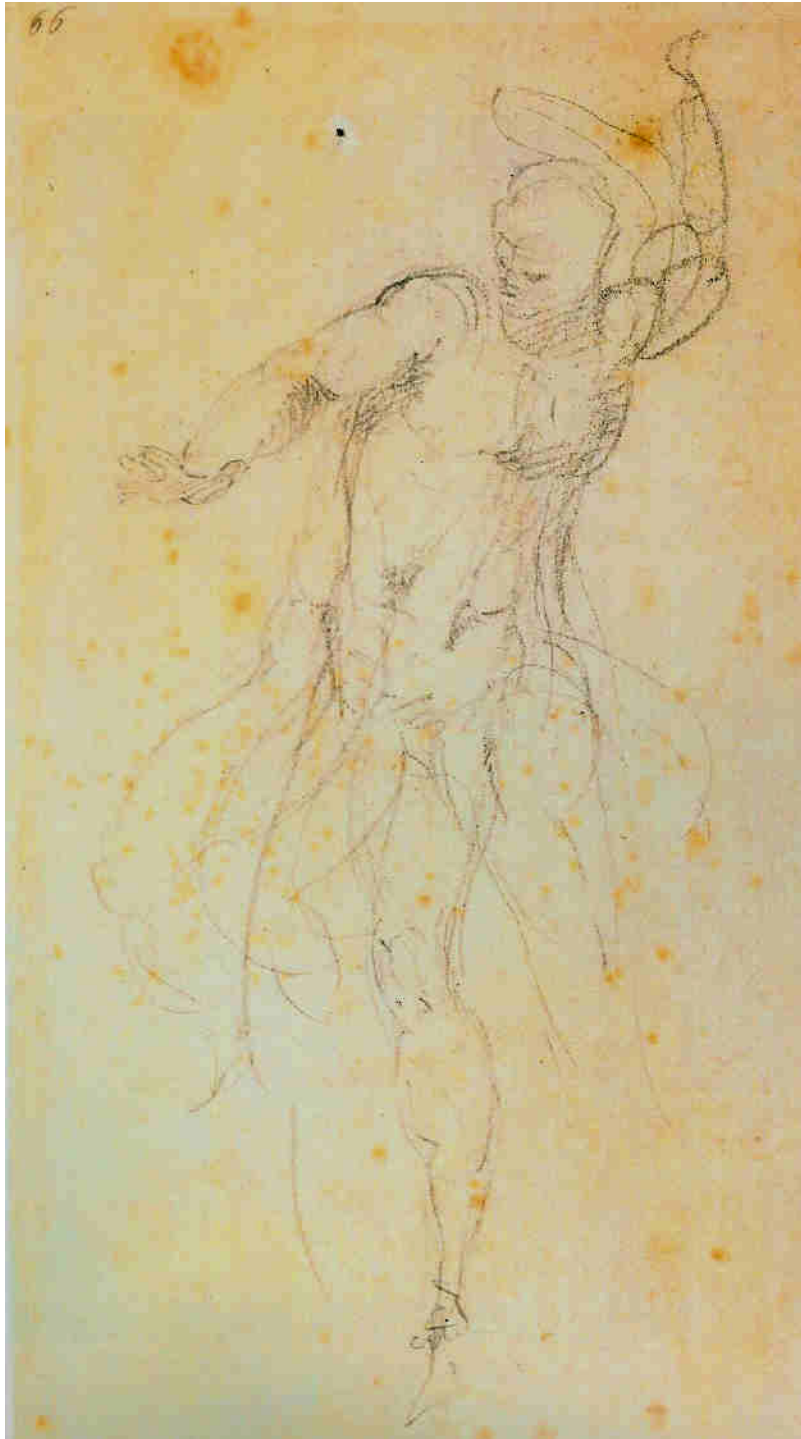


28. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Diagram of *giornate*, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy



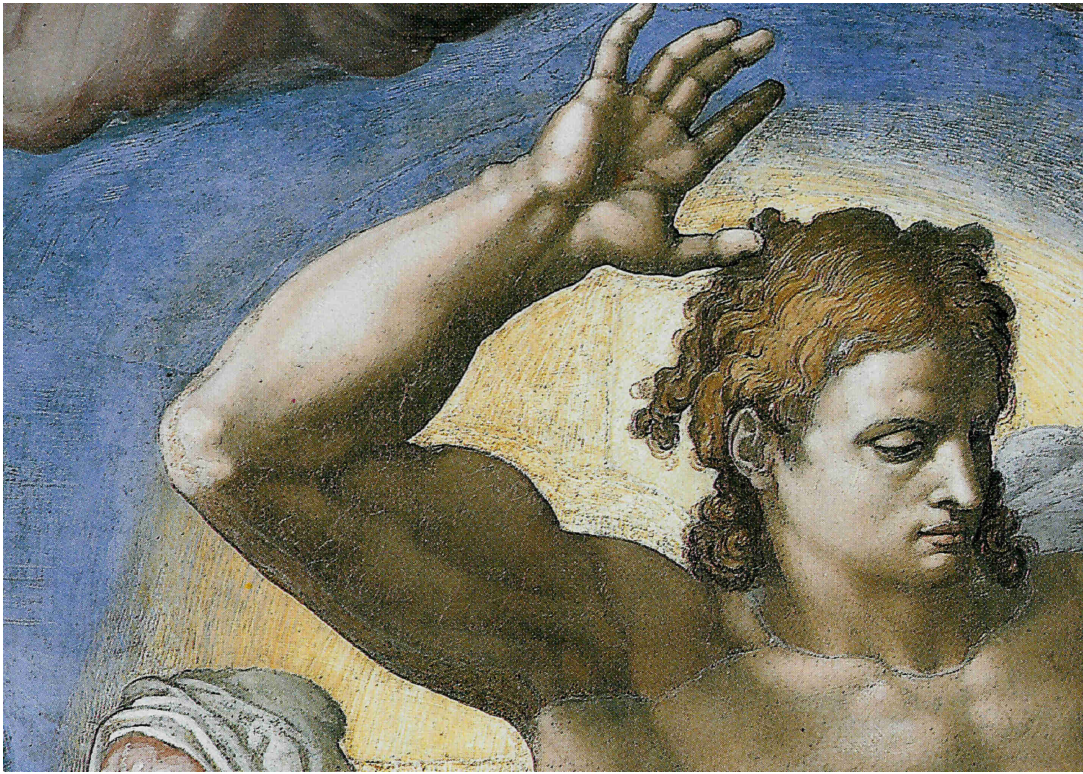


29. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Detail of Christ's *giornate* prior restoration, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy

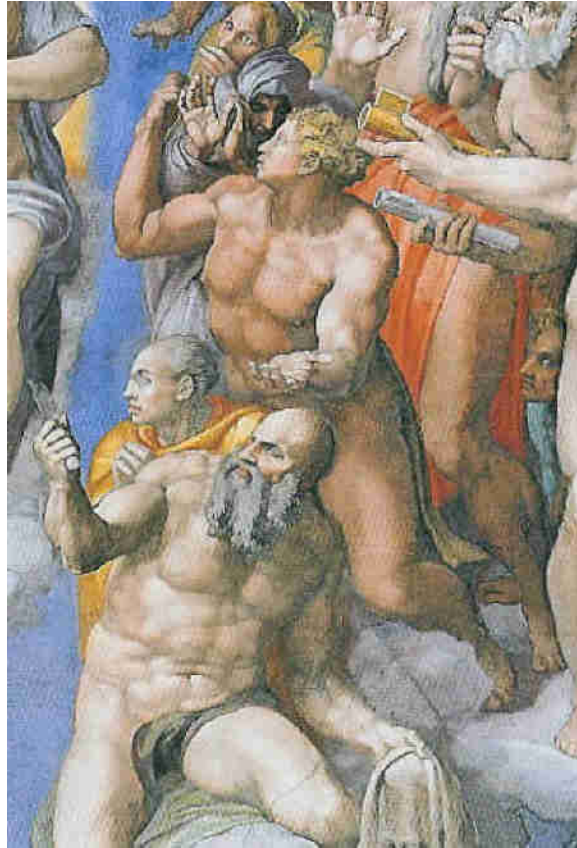


30. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Study for the *Risen Christ*, c.1534, Casa Buonarroti, Florence, Italy

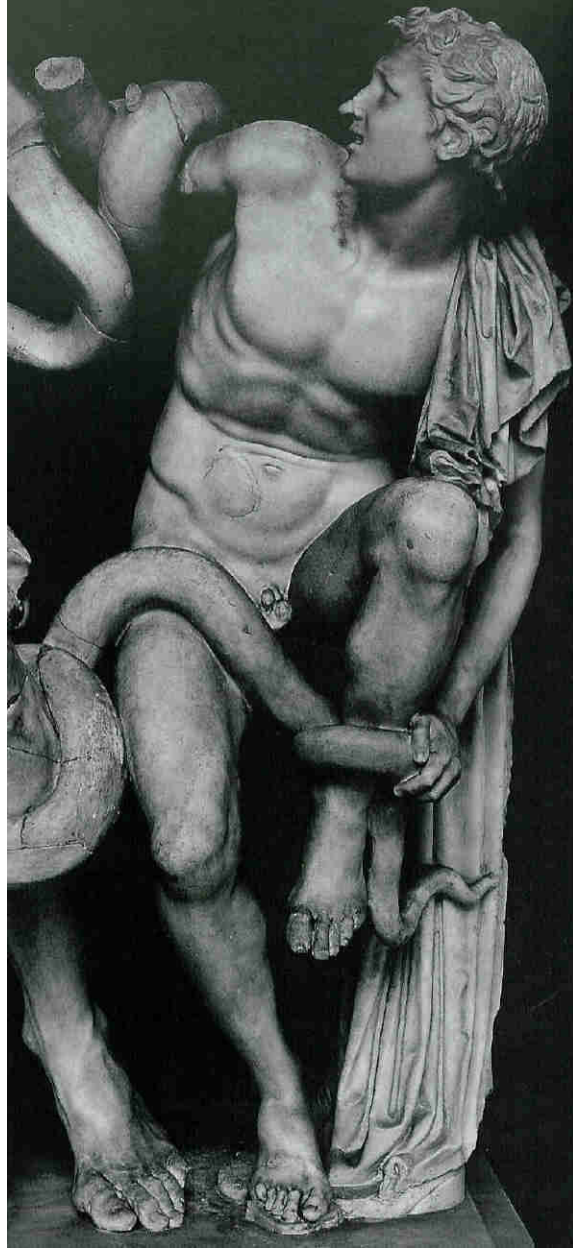




31. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Detail *a secco* revisions to Christ's bicep, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy



32. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Detail of unidentified figure (Adam), *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541, Rome, Italy



33. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes, Detail of Right Son, *Laocoön and His Sons*, First century BCE, Sculpture Court, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican



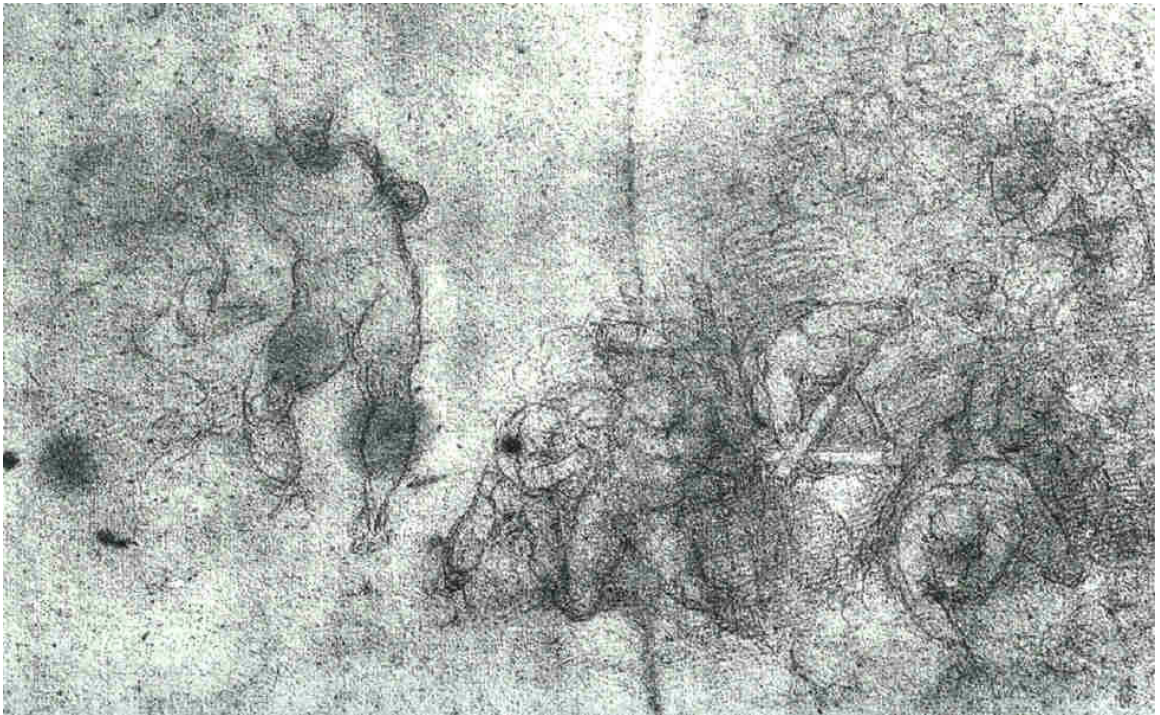


34. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Detail of Eve from *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1508-12, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican, Rome

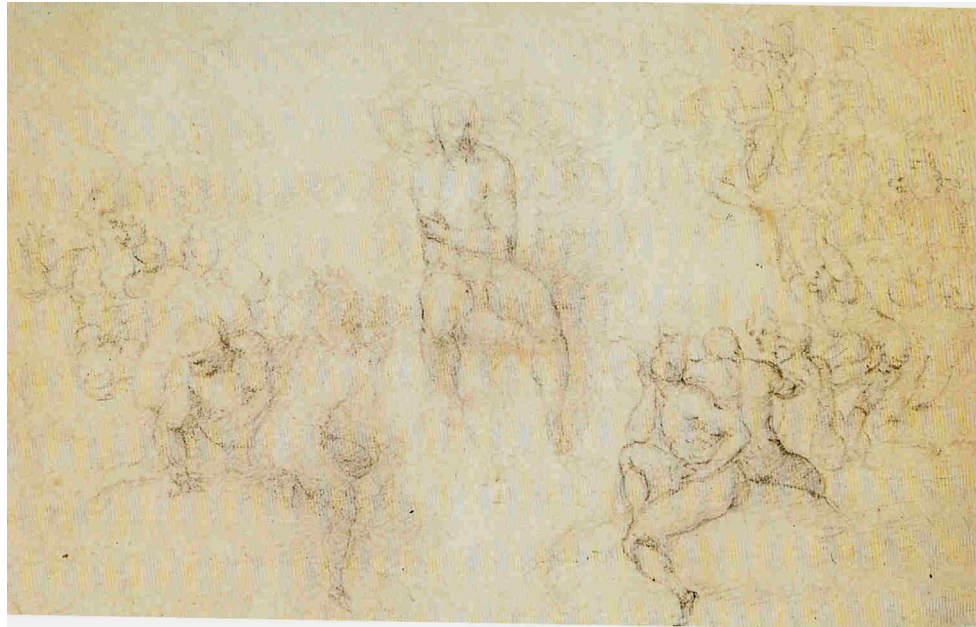




35. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Study for the *Last Judgment*, c.1534, Casa Buonarroti, Florence, Italy



36. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Study for the *Last Judgment*, c.1534, Uffizi, Florence, Italy



37. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Study for the *Last Judgment*, c.1534, Musée Bonnat, Bayonne

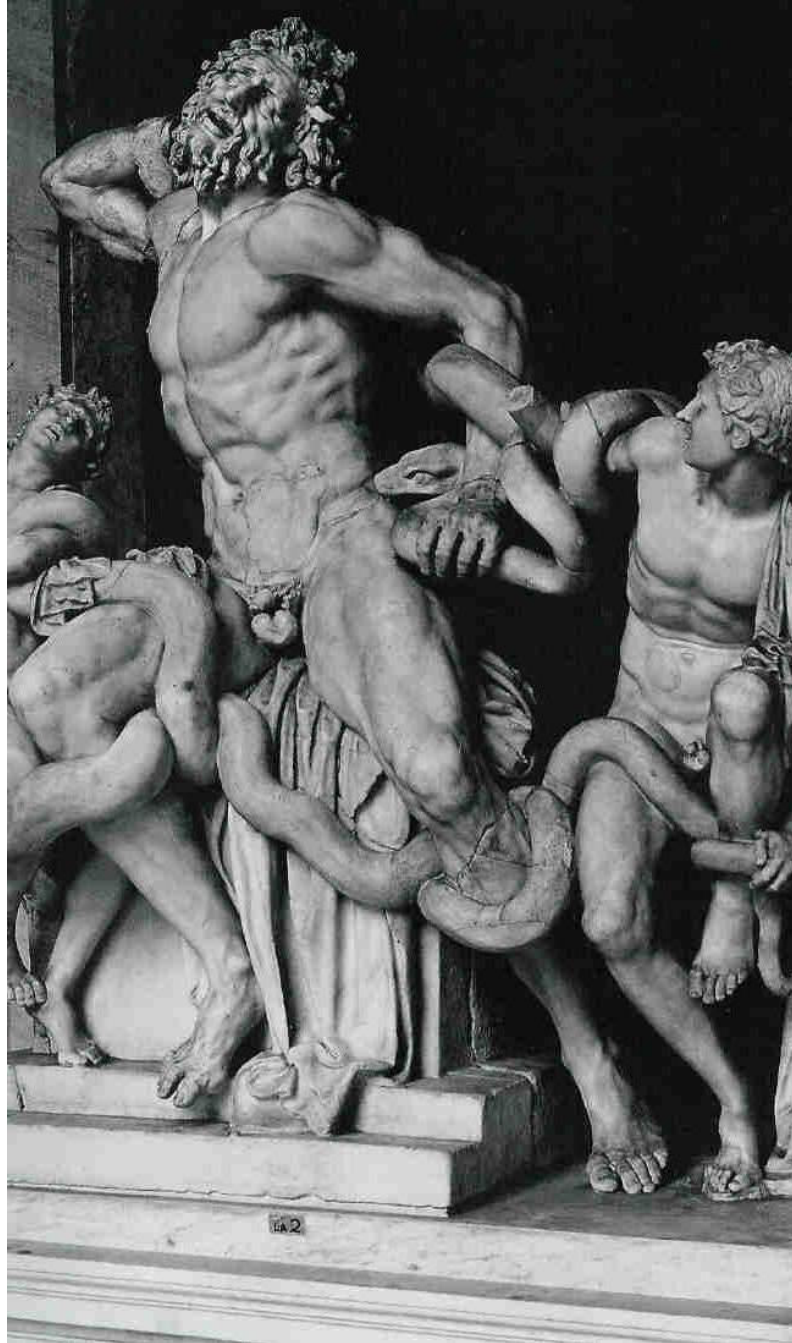




38. Attributed to Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli, Mural drawing of the *Head of Laocoön*, Basement of New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

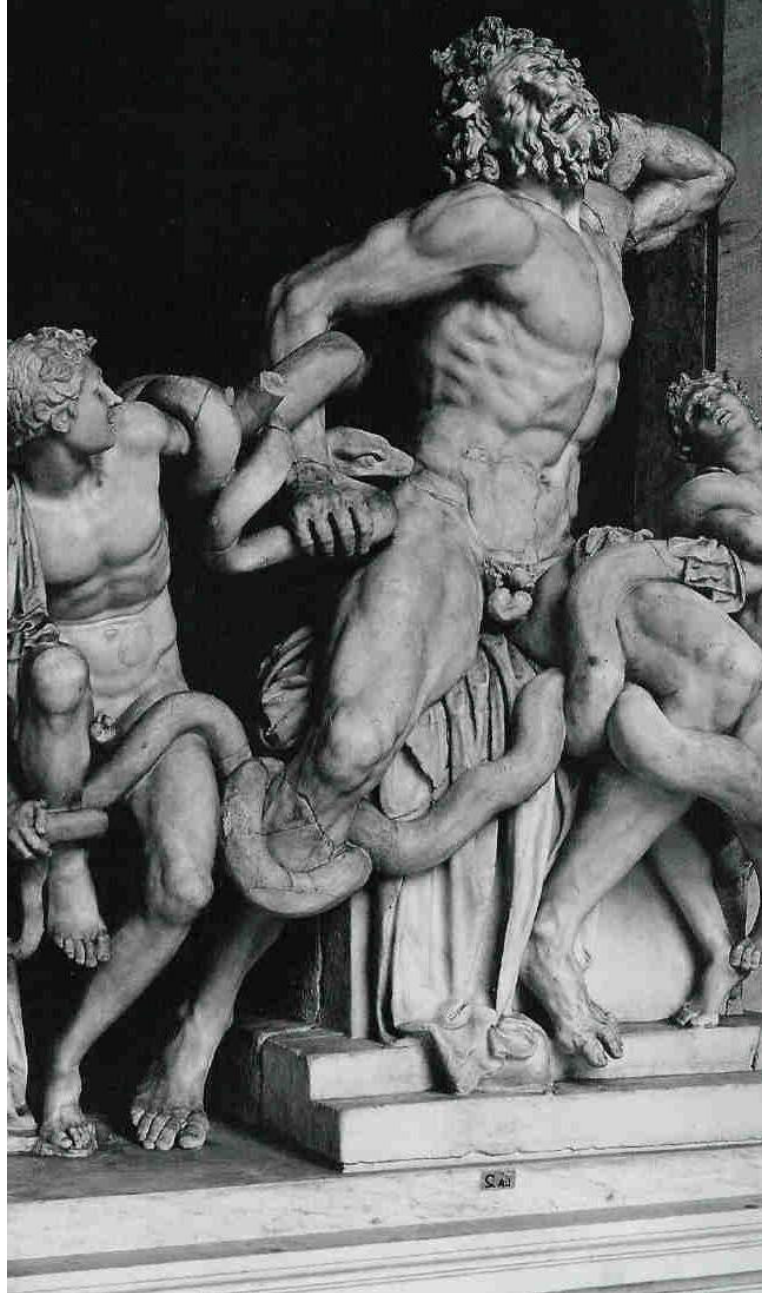


39. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Detail from the spandrel of *Crucifixion of Haman*, 1508-12, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, Vatican, Rome



40. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes, Detail right side, *Laocoön and His Sons*, First century BCE, Sculpture Court, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican





41. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes, Reversed Detail of right side, *Laocoön and His Sons*, First century BCE, Sculpture Court, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican