

# The last judgment michelangelo history essay



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The other corner had David cutting of the giant's head, causing the soldiers to marvel at his feat. The look on the faces of each character could be plainly understood. The third corner had the best figures of all - Moses and the Serpents. The agony of those dying of serpent bite, their bodies twisted with pain, their faces showing their silent screams - all brought out the desperation of those dying a horrible death. Finally, the figure of Ahasuerus or the wandering Jew, at repose and three members of the council that determined how the Jews would be saved from their enemies. The entire effort took four years and was completed in 1512. It was during this period that Michelangelo became increasingly careless about his own appearance and manner. He scarcely spoke to anyone, rarely changed his clothes, often working and sleeping in the same clothes, and hardly ever bathed. It is said that he took off his boots so infrequently that once when he tried to remove them, some of his skin also came off! He certainly must have found his work far more absorbing and meaningful than social engagements. Thus, his genius was established in the medium of painting also.

### **The Last Judgment:**

Michelangelo's other monumental work, made between 1536 and 1541, was The Last Judgment, painted on the wall at the rear of the altar of the Sistine Chapel, Rome. It showed the Resurrection of Christ, and the final day of reckoning, when humans would be judged for their actions on earth. Again a colossal work spanning an expansive wall, it was filled with expressive and mainly nude Biblical characters and some pagan characters. Michelangelo used all the conventions of painting such as perspective (depth), chiaroscuro (dark and light), delineation (outline) and coloration (use of colours). He

departed from tradition by showing Jesus at the centre of all the activity, rather than at the top of horizontal lines of people. Some scholars drew parallels with the idea of Copernicus' then new hypothesis that the sun was at the centre of the earth, and Jesus being shown at the centre of the painting. The life-like facial expressions of the characters created a sense of realism. As Vasari asserted, "... it is filled with all the passions known to human creatures, and all expressed in the most marvellous manner. For the proud, the envious, the avaricious, the wanton, and all the other suchlike sinners can be distinguished with ease by any man of fine perception."

Despite Michelangelo's effort and superior skill, some still criticized him. John Ruskin, the reputed critic and essayist, sums up most of the criticism that has been levelled against the genius: " All that shadowing, storming, and coiling of his... is mere stage decoration, and that of a vulgar kind. Light is, in reality, more awful than darkness - modesty more majestic than strength." Vulgarinity was linked to the nudes that Michelangelo showed so unabashedly. An anecdote reveals how such an attitude angered him. Once, when Pope Paul brought a master of ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena, to see the half-done painting, the latter criticized it on the grounds that the nudity was fit for a tavern and not for a holy place. He called it disgraceful and shameless. Michelangelo was so incensed at this that he immediately put Biagio's face to that of a painting of "...Minos with a great serpent twisted round the legs, among a heap of Devils in Hell." "...nor was Messer Biagio's pleading with the Pope and with Michelagnolo to have it removed of any avail, for it was left there in memory of the occasion..." in Vasari's words.

As a true artist, the work of art was uppermost in Michelangelo's mind. Even though he was god-fearing, he felt that the human form was a work of god and that there was no shame in showing it in all its aspects. He rebutted the criticism by stating, "What spirit is so empty and blind, that it cannot recognize the fact that the foot is nobler than the shoe, and skin more beautiful than the garment with which it is clothed?" Even in his sculptures, the prudish found nudity most annoying. In fact, some officials even tried to hide the genitals of his sculpture of David with fig leaves and sarcastically called it the 'fig leaf campaign'. Whenever royalty visited a replica kept in the London museum, a fig leaf was kept in a box to be used to cover the private parts so that they would not be shocked! In fact, throughout his career and even later, people from all walks of life tried to fault Michelangelo's work as pagan or un-Christian because of the nudity that he portrayed.

### **Pope Julius' Tomb – Once again:**

After the Sistine Chapel ceiling was completed, Michelangelo thought that he could return to the unfinished tomb of the Pope. But how wrong he was! He had just begun blocking the marble in 1513 when he got news of Pope Julius II's death. Although the Pope had made provisions for such an eventuality, the Medici Pope Leo X, who took over, started interrupting Michelangelo under the influence of some malicious people. Meanwhile, some of the relations of Pope Julius II even accused Michelangelo of misusing the funds generously given to him by the Pope. The humiliation and hurt embittered Michelangelo. In addition, some members of the Pope's Medici family succeeded in convincing Pope Leo X that Michelangelo should begin work on

the Medici Chapel, rather than that of Pope Julius. This happened after Michelangelo had spent many months in the Carrara quarries and got a good deal of marble. Uncaring and insensitive, the Pope's relations influenced him and finally, Michelangelo had to leave the tomb unfinished a second time. He openly wept when he was asked to leave his work unfinished and go to Florence to start work on the Medici Chapel at the Piazza di San Lorenzo.

### **Pope Leo X's tomb – More tears:**

Michelangelo spent many months in hardship in the Carrara mines, quarrying marble. All of a sudden, Pope Leo ordered him to get the marble from the Petrasanta mines, which was in a place that was quite difficult to access. But being unfairly forced to go there, Michelangelo had no choice, especially since the Pope had been his childhood companion in the Medici household. After Michelangelo had secured the marble with great difficulty, angering the owner of the Carrara mines by suddenly deserting him, Pope Leo abruptly cancelled the contract in 1520 without any explanation. Michelangelo was crushed by this conduct, particularly because he had already made a number of wax models, drawings and other plans before starting the actual work, as was his practice. Thus, Michelangelo suffered immense physical discomfort, mental fatigue and humiliation on account of the whimsical behaviour of the Medici.

Michelangelo's life was chaotic during this period as he kept shuttling between Rome and Florence. Pope Leo X died in 1521, an event that lay to waste his efforts of the last four years. Yet, without any qualm, the Medici family returned with a request for a tomb in the Basilica of San Lorenzo, which was fortunately completed by 1531. The tomb had many impressive

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embellishments. The most important were two sets of nudes: Dawn and Dusk on the side of the entrance where Lorenzo was interred. Their expressions hewed in stone clearly showed the grief they felt in the loss of Lorenzo the Magnificent. On the side where Giuliano was buried, was the other set of nudes: Night and Day. The unique architecture of the tomb as well as the placement of the statues spawned a completely unconventional style. Vasari enthuses, "...he made in it ornamentation in a composite order, in a more varied and more original manner than any other master at any time...That license has done much to give courage to those who have seen his methods to set themselves to imitate him."

Thus he set many architects and artists free from the shackles of following a beaten track.

### **Michelangelo the Architect:**

During the same period, the Medici family wanted their library to be turned into a public one. Michelangelo was the architect chosen, and he built what is today renowned as the ' Laurentian Library', a symbol of not only the Medici generosity but also Michelangelo's versatility. He was self-trained in architecture; he never had a teacher to train him; his experience consisted of the knowledge he had garnered while building the tombs. All the same, he took up the offer. As was expected, the library turned out to be one of the most admired pieces of architecture in the world. It contained a variety of ideas woven together to give shape to Michelangelo's conception of the ideal architectural design. The library was typical of Mannerist architecture. The receding columns looking like human bodies, the ambiguity about whether the roof is supported by walls or columns, the stairs flowing into the entrance

gave the whole place a sense of dynamism. In contrast was the reading room, with its long well-lighted windows, giving the room the required serenity and quietness.

Michelangelo produced new styles such as pilasters (vertical columns against walls for the purpose of decoration) tapering thinner at the bottom and a staircase with contrasting rectangular and curving forms. Even today, the structure inspires modern architects because of its 'living' design.

Michelangelo had to stop work midway because of the preparations for the defence of Florence from the impending attack of the Pope. He was made Chief of Fortifications and spent a long time fortifying his beloved city.

Needless to say, Michelangelo's fortification of Florence was undertaken and finished with the utmost sincerity and novelty of plan. Hence, the rest of the library had to be finished by some of his students as per his plans.

### **Poet:**

When the Medici regime became extremely oppressive, Michelangelo fled to Rome where he was threatened by the relatives of Pope Julius II, whose tomb he had left incomplete. Pope Clement helped him to sign another contract for the same tomb and Michelangelo got some breathing space. The unjustified accusations by Pope Julius II's relations that Michelangelo had misappropriated the money given to him by Pope Julius II, however, caused him to spend many sleepless and unhappy nights.

In 1533, Michelangelo also met Tomaso de Cavalieri, a young man who was almost fifty years younger and to whom he dedicated many sonnets,

madrigals and poems. In this too, he was criticized because people misunderstood his passionate verses to Tomaso de Cavalieri.

J. F. Nims, who translated his poems, clarified, " In the half dozen sonnets of 1532.... he is at pains to stress the innocence of his affection, especially against the " false tongues" and their slander. He is also uneasy because, innocent as he felt his passion to be, he feared the risk of serious sin, which he refers to in the prayerful lines of a sonnet probably of that year: '...o hoist me up from this doomed and evil slough of error: so close to death, from God so far."

The verses were probably a manifestation of his intense need for close relationships, which were few and far between in his lonely life. Having spent a good deal of his youth and early adulthood in the marble quarries, Michelangelo had missed out on the pleasures of life. Besides, his solitary nature did not make him an attractive company. Most social occasions had the important artists as invitees, but Michelangelo was rarely seen in any of these. These circumstances probably explain his need for close companionship. In Tomaso Cavalieri, perhaps, he saw his lost youth, what he might have been and how he could have achieved greater social grace. Notwithstanding these debacles, Michelangelo's poetry, like all his other talents, was exalted and sometimes difficult to translate. There are many neo-Platonic ideas relating to the superiority of the spirit over the body.

To quote Nims, "... (In the) Symposium of Plato... there is a description of just such a love for ' the divine beauty, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of



human life: ' It is such a conviction, writes Michelangelo, that justifies his devotion to such young men as Cavalieri... where ... God shows His glory, it's radiated veiled in some mortal form it shimmers through. And it's such I love, for the beauty mirrored there'."

Despite people's malicious gossip about his orientation, Michelangelo's poetry was like his other achievements, full of passion and ardour and greatly admired by acclaimed poets such as Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot.

### **Vittoria Colona:**

Some of Michelangelo's finest poetry was dedicated to Vittoria Colona, a Roman widow, who also addressed several poems to him. Vittoria had been engaged when she was four years old to Fernando d'Avalos whom she married when she turned 19. She was learned and much sought after by prominent suitors, but she remained faithful to her childhood fiancé.

However, her marriage was destined to be a tragic one. The couple were able to live peacefully only for two years. Fernando was called away for war and they could meet only rarely, communicating through letters and poems. In 1525, Fernando lost his life in a battle, and after she had travelled to various places, Vittoria settled in Rome in 1536 at the age of 46. This is where she met Michelangelo and a significant relationship blossomed between the two. Her literary talent and his genius are evident in the sonnets and poems they wrote to one another. She usually lived in a convent close to Michelangelo's house and they met often. She was admired in the literary circles of Florence and had several friends there. Even when they were apart, they continued to communicate with each other. An excerpt of a sonnet she addressed to Michelangelo displays her poetic skills:

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“ The wondrous and holy miracle by which,  
through his mercy, I perceive two opposed beings,  
one divine and one human, so fused into one  
that God becomes a true man and man a true God,  
causes my lowly desire to soar so high  
and in the same way so inflames my chilly hope  
that my free and candid heart no longer trembles  
beneath the evil, worthless burdens of the world.”

Michelangelo confessed to his friend Condivi that he loved Vittoria. However, their relationship did not reach any conclusion, although they remained intimate. In 1547, Vittoria breathed her last at the same convent in Rome.

### **To Rome and to glory once again: St. Peter's Basilica:**

It was in 1545 that the tomb of Pope Julius II was finally completed, after nearly forty years of blood, sweat and tears. Unfortunately, it was not to the scale that had previously been planned. The remains of Pope Julius II were not interred in this tomb. They lie in the Basilica of St. Peter's Cathedral next to those of his uncle, Pope Sixtus IV. In 1547, Michelangelo was invited by the Pope to redesign the Basilica of St. Peter. This Basilica or cathedral had first been built around 399AD by Emperor Constantine. Thereafter, it was constantly improved upon by various architects and sculptors, including Raphael and Bramante. This church is one of the most important in the

Roman Catholic tradition because St. Peter lies buried in the centre of the church. One of the twelve apostles, he is considered the first Bishop of the church. Hence, bishops of the church are usually buried at St. Peter's. It is curious that as long as Raphael and Bramante and their friends were alive, Michelangelo was never invited to contribute to the Basilica. It was only after their deaths, that he was called in. Many have surmised that the hostility felt by his rivals was instrumental in keeping the superior Michelangelo out of this project in Rome. When he was finally summoned, he was almost 71. Michelangelo was not very enthusiastic about this project, but the Pope would have none of his excuses.

Michelangelo accepted the Pope's proposal on the condition that he would be given a free hand. He took up this intricate project and even at that advanced age, treated it as a sacred obligation. For him, it was a spiritual undertaking and he accepted the work without charging any fees. Here too, he did not cut corners. He demonstrated the same level of dedication and hard work that he had displayed while painting the Sistine Chapel. His age was undoubtedly a deterrent, but a mellowed Michelangelo now asked for assistants to do the minor tasks. It is noteworthy, that by now, the master artist had smoothed some of the rough edges of his nature. He was not as foul-mouthed or uncouth as he had been, probably because of the multiple positive influences in his life. He had also turned to neo-Platonism quite seriously by now. Hence, he had not only gained in reputation as the topmost sculptor and architect, but also had the illustrious mingling with him.

Michelangelo made the most spectacular changes to the structure, specially the dome that dominates the Roman skyline today. His old rival, the late Bramante, had been the earlier architect and Michelangelo gave him full credit for the work he had done. He, however, changed the angular structures of the dome and gave the entire structure a softer, more flowing design. The innovative ovoid shape of the dome was a structural necessity and not merely for decoration. As there was very little support for the dome from other portions of the structure, this became an essential requirement. His student Jacopo Barozzi and Giorgio Vasari completed some of the work after his death. Thereafter, Giacomo della Porta, a Roman architect, brought about certain modifications. Bernini, another famous architect, adapted a few important segments, yet Michelangelo's inputs have remained mostly unaltered. It is the most imposing cathedral in the world and attracts millions of devotees and visitors. There were many changes suggested, but the ovoid dome still remains one of the architectural achievements of Michelangelo and an important attraction of the Cathedral.

### **Departure:**

In February 1564, Michelangelo worked on the Rondanini Pieta, the Virgin Mary mourning over the body of Christ. A significant feature of the sculpture was the frailty of appearance of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. It seemed to reflect the consciousness of his mortality. The interesting touch was the appearance of Jesus supporting his mother on his back. This seemed to suggest that Mary derived spiritual solace in her hour of grief from Jesus.

Later, Michelangelo developed fever, as observed by his friend Daniele da Volterra, but refused to rest and exposed himself to the cold night air. On

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18th February he could no longer get up and breathed his last at the age of 88. To quote Ruffini Marco, “ The artist spent his last hours in the presence of his friends Diomedes Leoni, Daniele da Volterra and Tommaso dei Cavalieri and his doctors Gherardo Fidelissimi and Federico Donati. The Roman confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato, which Michelangelo had joined fifty years earlier, took charge of the burial.” His body was placed in the Campagna dell’Assunta in Rome.

### **Rite of Passage:**

Michelangelo, when alive, had always expressed a deep desire to be placed in the earth of his beloved city Florence after his death. His nephew Leonardo, his closest relation, and his Florentine friends, including his biographer Vasari and Borghini made arrangements to bring back his mortal remains to Florence. They had decided to keep the entire event a secret, but failed miserably! On 12th March, the body was brought back to Florence. The casket was borne on the shoulders of thirty-two people belonging to Vasari’s Academy which he had dedicated to Michelangelo and taken to his tomb in Santa Croce. They found to their surprise that the premises were overflowing with the people of Florence. Leonardo and Vasari had decided that they would not open the casket for fear that the body would be decomposed after so many days of being buried. Yet Borghini threw open the cover of the casket. Ruffini eloquently describes the revelation that awaited the congregation: “ What was found exceeded all expectations: the body had not decayed.” “ A true miracle”, Borghini exclaimed, ‘ considering that the artist had died twenty-two days earlier.’ Borghini ordered the academicians to pay homage to the artist by touching his head, one by one. It was one of the

most moving farewells to a great son of Florence. Michelangelo's tomb was designed by Giorgio Vasari and embellished by a few of his followers. The tomb epitomises Architecture, Painting and Sculpture and shows many important events of his life. The Church of Santa Croce contains the remains of many other distinguished luminaries such as Galileo and Machiavelli and therefore it is also known as the Temple of the Italian Glories.

### **Tribute:**

Michelangelo's life was spent in gruelling and devoted hard work; he was often berated and tortured by people who took him for granted. But for Michelangelo, his work was his life. He never married nor had any children. All his hours were spent in giving tangible shape to what can only be called divine inspiration. He lived a frugal life, with no airs or demands. He was generous even with those who stole from him, as was the case with a model for his poetry, Fibo de Poggio. Others were ungrateful, except for Tomaso Cavalieri about whom many have made inapt statements based on Michelangelo's eloquent poems addressed to him. He never affected geniality to please anyone. He proverbially wore his heart on his sleeve, and most of his emotions were plainly visible. This may also be the reason that Michelangelo had devoted followers such as Giorgio Vasari and Paolo Giovio, his biographers, and Condivi, his apprentice who constantly remained with him. They always vouched for his decency and purity, often talking about his monk-like austerity.

During his long life, Michelangelo encountered almost every human vice and virtue. At a young age he learnt to stoically keep away from societal contact because of his social ineptitude. But this only made him hide into his own

shell. It was his work, his inspiration, his observation of human nature and luckily the presence of some friends that helped him to lower his defences to an extent. But those close to him never left him, seeing his vulnerability as well as his genius. Vasari opined, “ Truly his coming was to the world...an exemplar sent by God to the men of our arts, to the end that they might learn from his life the nature of noble character, and from his works what true and excellent craftsmen ought to be.”

A colossus such as Michelangelo comes to earth only rarely. The best tribute to this master is in his own words:

**“ The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection.”**