



Screenshot of the Vatican's online Sistine Chapel



Screenshot of the ceiling of the Vatican's online Sistine Chapel



One of the "ignudi" from Michelangelo's ceiling for the Sistine Chapel



Michelangelo's *The Birth of Adam*

DIGITAL DESACRALIZATION

by Ben Davis

The Vatican has put the Sistine Chapel [online](#). It is a nifty experience, a 360-degree, zoomable simulacra of the legendary chamber, with its assorted frescos, some of the most famous religious artworks in history. You can, thanks to the Vatican's technical wizardry, "stand" at the center of the chamber, look straight up, and zoom upwards into Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. Since you experience the images alone, in front of your computer, instead of surrounded by throngs of pushy tourists, the virtual experience may even be superior to actually being there.

Why has the Vatican released the Chapel to the wild world of the web? If I were cynical, I might note that the link landed in my inbox at roughly the same moment that Pope Benedict is under fire for coddling sex predators within the church, a long-simmering scandal that has now touched the heights of the Catholic hierarchy. But the Sistine Chapel's wholesale move into cyberspace can probably best be read alongside another gambit of the current Pope, his attempt to refresh the dialogue between art and religion. This was kicked off with a conference at the Vatican in November of last year, "the first of many initiatives aimed at bridging the gap that has developed between spirituality and artistic expression over the last century or so" (in the [words](#) of a Papal spokesperson), which invited Catholic-affiliated art luminaries like Bono, [Daniel Libeskind](#), Ennio Morricone, [Bill Viola](#) and Bob Wilson to chat about the role spirituality plays in creation.

That meeting, in fact, took place -- where else? -- in the Sistine Chapel. In the lead-up to the conference, Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi offered up Michelangelo's extraordinary achievement as example of the inspiration that today's artists can take from "transcendence," that is, faith. The entire thrust of the new Vatican arts initiative comes from an awareness that contemporary religious art has become synonymous with "bad taste," in the phrase of Vatican Museums head Antonio Paolucci (awesome to hear that judgment get the infallible Papal seal of approval!). As a recent *Times of London* article [noted](#): "It is less art that needs the Church, but the Church, in its waning popularity, that needs art."

Consequently, despite the gee-whiz coolness of it, there can't help but be something slightly pathetic about the experience of the Vatican's digital Sistine Chapel. In the past art lovers would have to come, pilgrim-like, to Rome, to see Michelangelo's masterpiece; now the Vatican has given up its treasure to the same kind of web technology used by real-estate agents and car dealerships to hawk their wares. The subtext is of a desperate need for some good PR.

Unfortunately for the embattled Church, the decision to invoke Michelangelo as ideal Catholic artist is only going to open up questions that it doesn't want to deal with.

For one thing, there is the vigorous debate around Michelangelo's sexuality. How gay was Michelangelo? Art-historical argument rages around this question, as well as the connected question of how



Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*



Detail of *The Last Judgment*, depicting Biagio da Cesena as Minos



Michelangelo's *David*

chaste he was. In part, we can sidestep the debate by noting that "homosexuality" is a modern creation -- the first instance of the word comes in 1869 (coincident with the first use of the word "heterosexual," in fact). Until then, homosexual acts were condemned, but people were not defined as one thing or the other.

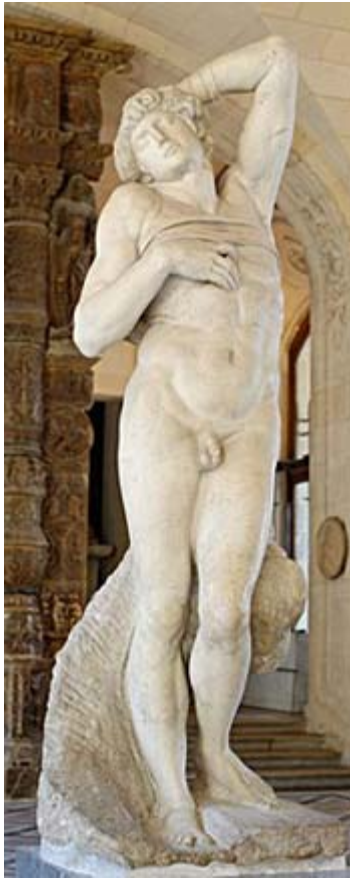
But, really, is there any real doubt that Michelangelo was attracted to men? He wrote effusive, idealizing love poetry to the dashing nobleman Tommaso dei Cavalieri -- among others -- 34 years his junior. "If conquered and suppressed is the way I must be bless'd, / It is no marvel that, nude and alone / With a well-armed cavalier, as his captive, do I rest," wrote the artist ("cavalier" being a play on Cavalieri's name). The church may have been one of Michelangelo's major patrons ("being a prudent man and fearing the power of the Pope, he resolved to say things to please him" is how Vasari narrates the relationship), but as an artist his key inspiration was the fleshy, mythical world of pagan antiquity, and, above all, a vigorous affection for the nude male form. Women are rare in his art, and mainly mothers. On the other hand, in sculpture after sculpture, work after work, Michelangelo commits himself to depictions of men in the buff. Even the Sistine Chapel, with its epic cycle of Biblical scenes, features a good number of strapping nude dudes, the "ignudi," purely for decoration.

Take a deep look at *The Creation of Adam*: there's Adam, a male odalisque, laid on the grass, reaching out languorously to touch the hand of God, who is in turn portrayed as a toga-wearing elder straight from the gardens of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Eve, waiting her turn beneath God's arm, looks on stoically with, it seems, a hint of jealousy. If you ask me, the power of this image comes partly from the authentic sense of man-on-man tenderness that Michelangelo is able to impart to the drama of Creation.

That's a creative reading, but what is indisputable is that Michelangelo's works were considered free-spirited enough that they didn't fit well with Catholic dogma, despite their evident brilliance, which the Church was eager to appropriate. His work in the Sistine Chapel was accused of paganism. Famously, the papal master of ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena, said (in Vasari's recount) of *The Last Judgment* "that it was a very disgraceful thing to have made in so honorable a place all those nude figures showing their nakedness so shamelessly, and that it was a work not for the chapel of a Pope, but for a brothel or tavern" (Michelangelo retaliated by painting Cesena's face on the devil Minos). All those dangling penises were **too much** for the Counter-Reformation, which started its "fig-leaf" campaign against indecency by covering Michelangelo's figures with painted loincloths. Published after his death, Michelangelo's poems idolizing Cavalieri were edited to substitute male pronouns with female ones.

If the Church embraced the healthy sexuality represented in Michelangelo's art, allowing it some expression instead of forcing believers repress their perfectly natural impulses, then the Pope might not be in the unpleasant situation he is today. Just sayin'.

Then there is the vexed question of Michelangelo's relation to the Church's politics. He was a Florentine patriot, and the specific social-economic characteristic of Florence was that it was the home of great merchants and bankers who would fund many of the early Renaissance monuments. It is a scholarly commonplace that the influence of the nascent commercial class, not the "transcendent" virtue of the Catholic Church, is what accounts for the difference between the Church-dominated art of the Middle Ages and the new art-philosophy based on individual genius, humanism. Michelangelo's most famous work, the *David*, was commissioned in 1501 for the republican government of Florence to celebrate the ousting of its Medici rulers (by that time, essentially despots), and the city-state's



Michelangelo's *The Dying Slave*



Detail of *The Last Judgment*, showing Michelangelo's self-portrait as the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew

corresponding independence from the Papal States. David, in effect, represents the free spirit of Florence, ready to confront the "Goliath" of Medievalism.

The Popes of Michelangelo's day were among the most debauched and worldly in history, a little fact which makes a joke of the efforts of today's Church to laud their patronage of the arts as exemplary of the harmonious synthesis of art and religion. These men may be remembered for their art commissions, but these were part and parcel of their thirst for worldly symbols of prestige: It was the selling of indulgences to construct St. Peter's Basilica that put Martin Luther over the edge, touching off the Reformation.

Michelangelo completed the wondrous ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in 1512. That same year, Cardinal Giovanni de Medici -- later Pope Leo X -- reasserted Medici dominance of Florence with the use of Papal troops, ending democratic rule. When the Florentines once again threw off the Medicis in 1527 to reestablish the Republic, Michelangelo came to their defense, agreeing to design the city's fortifications. But Pope Clement VII again reasserted control of the city through an alliance with the Holy Roman Empire, recaptured Florence, and made Alessandro de Medici hereditary Duke of Florence.

Scholars have **claimed** that it is this change in political climate -- the crushing of the Florentine Republic -- that lays behind the shift in tone between the serenity of the panels of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and the frenzied panorama of *The Last Judgment* of 1537-1541, executed after the end of Republican prospects in Italy. If the High Renaissance style represents the hope inspired by new human possibilities and Baroque is the art of Counter-Reformatory bombast, then Mannerism is the art of the psychic distress caused by the transition between the two. Such a conclusion is justified by the famous self-portrait encoded in *The Last Judgment*, where Michelangelo places his own face on the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew. Whatever the place of the image within the symbolism of the piece, I do not think that one depicts oneself as a bag of shredded skin dangling over the abyss of hell without meaning something by it.

All of which brings us back, at length, to the digital Sistine Chapel. It's a neat gimmick, but the lesson of the tale above is that treating art as promotional gimmickry does little to resolve the dilemmas of spirituality. So here's some advice: With respect to the project of "renewing the dialogue between faith and art," it seems to me that it is going to be difficult to attract today's most inventive, intelligent and forward-thinking artists while promoting Medieval social mores -- the Catholic Church's positions on abortion, contraception and gay rights have no basis in science; they are just dogma. But if the Vatican can embrace zoomable Flash applications in its effort to reach a modern audience, well, maybe it can take a more tolerant view of these things as well. What do you say, Pope Benedict?

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