

Critical Reflection 2:

'The Creation of Adam' by Michelangelo (1508-1512)

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'The Creation of Adam' by Michelangelo (1508-1512) can be viewed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, Rome. This is one of nine paintings in the center vault of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Pope Julius II, of the Catholic Church, commissioned Michelangelo to do the paintings. During this writing, viewers will go through the process of a formal analysis and contextual analysis by applying a theoretical Marxist view on the artist. The social classification, education, and the economic effect on the artist, and the patron, will all be discussed as a challenge to figure out why Michelangelo (a sculptor) was commissioned to paint the ceiling of one of the most prestigious chapels in the world. The book written by Anne D'Alleva titled *'Methods and Theories of Art History'* describes and influences both analysis approaches.¹

At first glance of this painting, the viewer's eyes immediately get caught at the fingertips of God and Adam, creating a focal point and emphasis on this area. Michelangelo has created implied lines that guide our eyes through the painting and to this focal point. He has achieved form by the combination of shape and value created by the tints and shades of color. The mass and volume of the figures can be felt by the highlights and shadows made by the implied light from the top left of the painting. Contrast is also achieved by the highlight and shadows casted across the figures, as well as a high contrast between the sky and the subject matter. This adds another emphasis between the two figures. The colors used by Michelangelo are pastel like and soft in appearance, drawing no attention to a singular spot. The fresco process which is where the pigment is immediately applied to wet plaster on the ceiling creates the textural feel of the artwork. Michelangelo has achieved a visual depth by overlapping the subject matter pushing things back in space. There is an implied motion from the figure of God that looks as if he is

¹ D'Alleva, Anne, *Methods & Theories of Art History*, (2005), pp. 17-45; 46-70

flying in from the right side of the painting. With the mass of God, and some angels, flying in from the right and the earthly mass where Adam is reclined create a visual balance in the image. Unity is created by the repeated human-like figures throughout the painting, and the implied line and near touching of God and Adam's hand. Michelangelo has achieved variety by the different characteristics of each human figure. The proportions between the size of two main figures, God and Adam, and the rest of the image creates an emphasis on the interaction happening between the two important figures.

Marxism aesthetics looks at the social hierarchy of the artist and patrons. The social class, political beliefs and religion, economical effect on the artist and patron are what the viewers look at in a Marxist theoretic view. A Marxist approach will take the historical context and what led up to the creation of the artwork, to understand and appreciate the artwork.²

Pope Julius II was one of the most feared men in the world, and the biggest art patron of his time.³ During this time in history being a patron of art was viewed as being high class. People would commission as much art as they could to show off how rich they were. Although, no one was as rich as the Catholic Church and Pope Julius II during his leadership. He began reign as Pope in 1508, beginning the expansion of the Papal States and the church throughout the land. At this time, Pope Julius II would commission artists such as Raphael, Donato Bramante, and Michelangelo to create art for the Sistine Chapel and courtyard. The question can then be asked, how did Michelangelo become the artist Pope Julius II wanted more than anybody else?

² "What Do Marxists Have To Say About Art?" Culture Matters. October 14, 2017. Accessed June 05, 2021. <https://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/culture/theory/item/2626-what-do-marxists-have-to-say-about-art>.

³ "Pope Julius II." Infoplease. Accessed June 05, 2021. <https://www.infoplease.com/people/who2-biography/pope-julius-ii>.

Michelangelo was raised by a single father and lived a hard life until his father relented and let him study in an apprenticeship under Domenico del Ghirlandaio. After he left his apprenticeship around the age of 15, he rose to a socially high class by gaining the respect of Lorenzo de Medici. The Medici family took over as the biggest patrons of art in late 15th century Europe, which allowed Michelangelo to gain fame and excellence, although he was still unknown. Through the 1490s, Michelangelo struggled to find work with the death of Lorenzo de Medici. Due to political and religious unrest in Florence, Michelangelo left to travel around Europe. Even though Michelangelo was a religious man, believing in the Catholic Church and God, much of his work was considered as a pagan approach against the church. He would return to Florence, Italy around the turn of the century (1500). After the creation of the massive marble sculpture *'The David'* (1504), Michelangelo became very rich and was considered the best artist in the world. He was considered very arrogant in the eyes of his rivals. Viewers can see why Pope Julius II wanted Michelangelo to create the paintings in the Sistine Chapel vault.⁴

The relationship between Pope Julius II and Michelangelo was no love affair. After commissioning Michelangelo to sculpt the façade of his tomb, he backed out and didn't pay Michelangelo for the work he had done so far. Because of this, the relationship was tarnished and Pope Julius II had to bully Michelangelo to create more art for him. Once Michelangelo agreed to come back to the Vatican, the Pope's motivation to commission him came from his architect Donato Bramante. Bramante (Michelangelo's biggest rival) encouraged Pope Julius II to commission Michelangelo to paint on the Sistine Chapel ceiling hoping he would fail and lose all

⁴ *The Divine Michelangelo: Episode 1*. Films On Demand. 2004. Accessed June 5, 2021. <https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=237926&xtid=75703>.

respect the Pope had for him.⁵ The size of this commission by the Pope was massive, although it consisted of multiple different paintings, ‘*The Creation of Adam*’ is by far the most famous and recognizable in the world. The Pope loved being the richest and most feared man which is why he commissioned such a large project to one man. At first Pope Julius II wanted geometric ideologies painted across the ceiling, but Michelangelo argued that he should paint scenes from the Old Testament. Michelangelo envisioned the stories of the creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, and the great flood just to name a few.⁶ Most religious art didn’t allow the artist to create self-expression⁷, but Michelangelo executed expressions, emotions, and individuality in each human figure he created. This is what separated Michelangelo from other artists during this time. Some historians even believe that Michelangelo created some figures in his own image.

In conclusion, Michelangelo became one of the most famous artists in the world, because of his work on the Sistine Chapel and ‘*The David*.’ After starting his life in near poverty and living this way, he was always able to find ways to create sculptures to somehow earn money. Around the age of 30, he was able to create one of the most famous sculptures in the world, ‘*The David*.’ Pope Julius II and the Medici family were the biggest patrons leading to his rise in social class. Michelangelo became known around Europe for his approach to divine perfection in all his work. After his creation of ‘*The David*’ Michelangelo became socially high class and economically successful and continued creating works of art until the day he died.

⁵ *The Divine Michelangelo: Episode 2*. Films On Demand. 2004. Accessed June 5, 2021. <https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=237926&xtid=75631>.

⁶ "Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (article)." Khan Academy. Accessed June 05, 2021. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/early-europe-and-colonial-america/renaissance-art-europe-ap/a/michelangelo-ceiling-of-the-sistine-chapel>.

⁷ O'Shea, Rupert. "Marxism, Materialism and Art." In *Defence of Marxism*. October 01, 2015. Accessed June 05, 2021. <https://www.marxist.com/marxism-materialism-and-art.htm>.

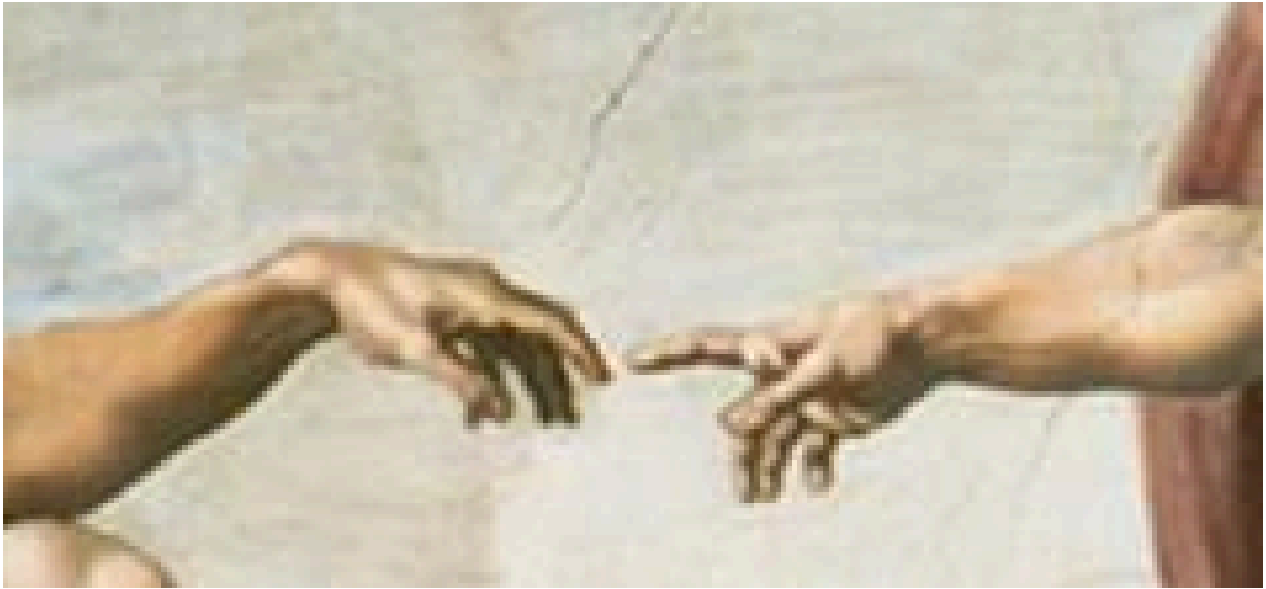


Figure 1: *'The Creation of Adam'* by Michelangelo (1508-1512)⁸

⁸ Michelangelo. 1508-1512. Rome: Sistine Chapel: ceiling frescos: Creation of Adam. https://library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING_ART_1039490527.

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