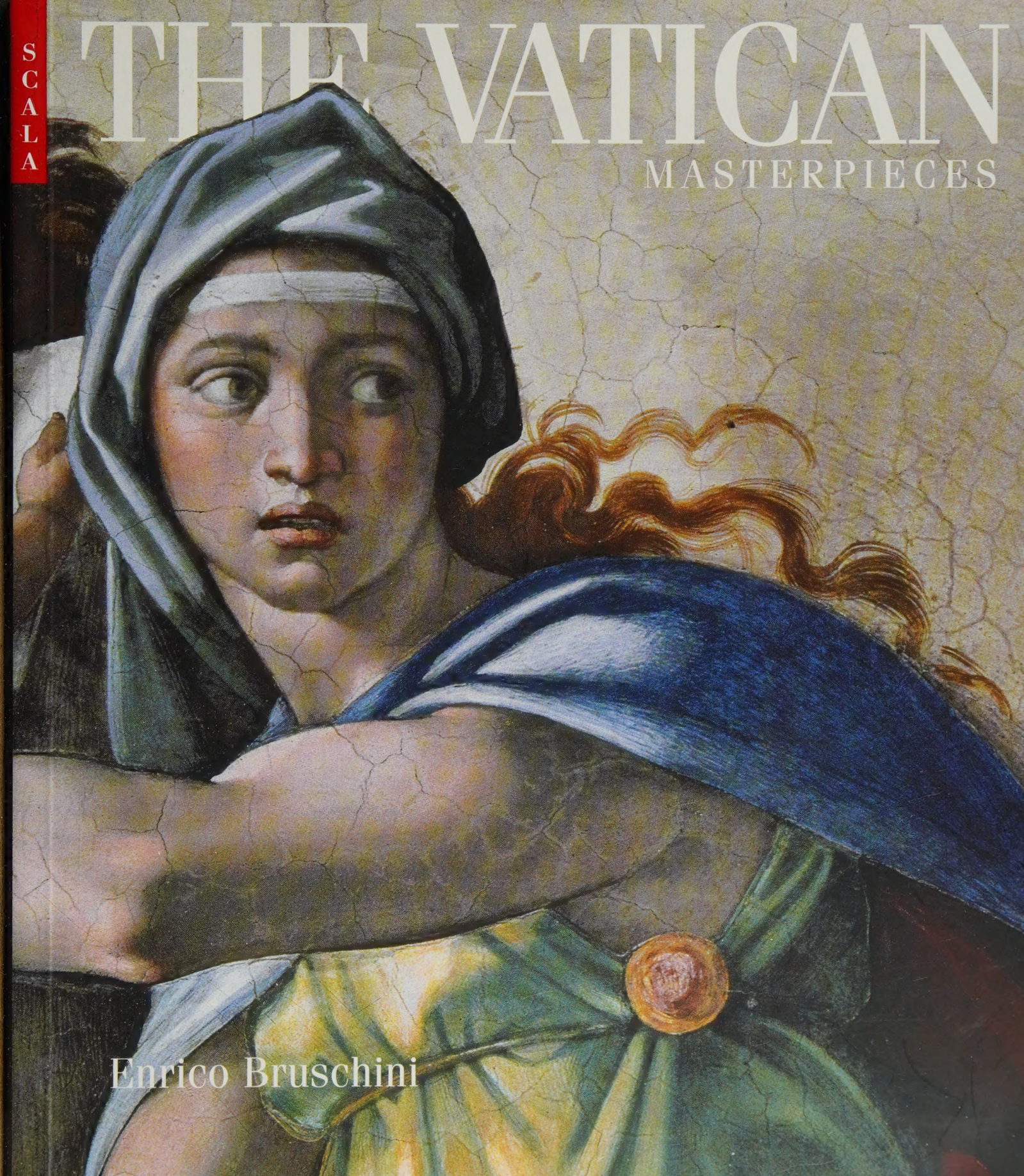
SCALA

THE VATICAN

MASTERPIECES



Enrico Bruschini

- **A** Picture Gallery
- **B1** Museo Pio-Clementino
- **B2** Octagonal Courtyard
- **B3** Sala degli Animali
- **B4** Sala delle Muse
- **B5** Sala Rotonda
- **C** Egyptian Museum
- **D1** Etruscan Museum
- **D2** Collection of Greek Vases
- **E** Gallery of the Candelabra
- **F** Gallery of Tapestries
- **G** Gallery of Maps
- **H1** Sala di Costantino
- **H2** Sala dei Chiaroscuri
- **H3** Chapel of Pope Nicolas V
- **I1** Stanza di Eliodoro
- **I2** Stanza della Segnatura
- **I3** Stanza dell'Incendio di Borgo
- **J** Borgia Rooms
- **K** Sistine Chapel
- **L1** Gallery of the Apostolic Library
- **L2** Room of the Aldobrandini Marriage
- **L3** *Planisphere*
- **L4** Sistine Hall of the Vatican Library
- **M1** Sala Regia
- **M2** Sala Ducale
- **M3** Cappella Paolina

Masterpieces of the Vatican

SCALA

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Enrico Bruschini

First edition 2004 EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI, SCALA GROUP and SCALA PUBLISHERS

ISBN-13: 978-1-85759-270-2 (English)
ISBN-13: 978-88-8117-088-3 (Italian)

Edited by Doriana Comerlati
Translation into English by Liz Heron
Designed by Anikst Design
Produced by Scala Publishers
Printed in Italy

10 9 8 7

EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI
00120 Città del Vaticano

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62, Via Chiantigiana
50011 Antella
Florence

SCALA PUBLISHERS LTD
Northburgh House
10 Northburgh Street
London EC1V 0AT

Front cover shows a detail of *The Delphic Sybil* (see page 124).

Back cover shows the head of *The Apollo Belvedere* (see page 28).

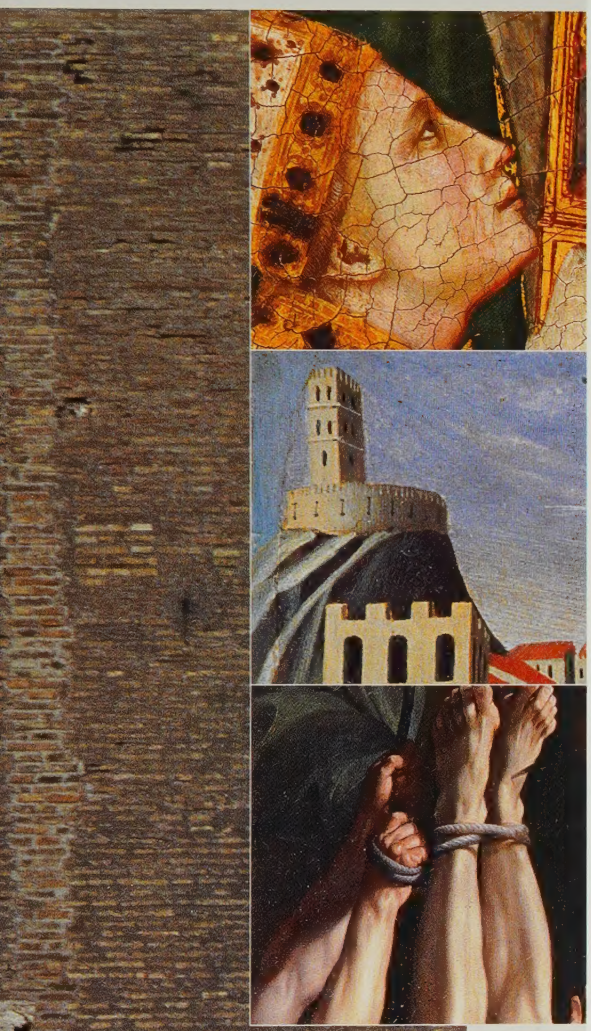
Previous page shows a detail of *The Last Judgement* (see page 130).

This page shows a detail of *The Transfiguration* (see page 17).

Contents

The Vatican Museums	6
Former Papal Apartments	46
The Sistine Chapel	86
Saint Peter's Basilica	146
Index	160

The Vatican Museums



Choosing about one hundred masterpieces from the thousands of works on show in the Vatican Museums has not been easy. We have made our selection from the most outstanding works with loving care.

The purpose of this volume is to provide readers with a useful tool for understanding and appreciating these masterworks, and at the same time to illustrate their role and significance in the history of art.The works are presented in the sequence in which they appear to visitors following the new one-way tour through the galleries. This volume, therefore, is both a handsome art book that can be consulted at home and a practical in-depth guide for visitors to the Vatican Museums. Each masterpiece is accompanied by explanatory text, which in most cases is supplemented, in italics, by some personal observation on the part of the author or by some additional art-historical information that adds to the interest of the work.

On show in the Vatican Museums are thousands of masterpieces that cover more than four thousand years of history, from the head of the Egyptian king Mentuhotep, a portrait dating from 2050 BC, to works of modern art. These treasures from the art of the past and the present have been assembled in the Vatican collections through the intelligence and good taste of numerous popes.

This main doorway of the Vatican Museums (opposite) was built in 1932 by the architect Giuseppe Momo (1875–1940) as a new entrance into the Vatican Museums, opens through the massive walls constructed in the sixteenth century for the defence of the Vatican. It is surmounted by two statues, works by Pietro Melandri, depicting the two great artists who spent a great part of their lives adding to the riches of the Vatican and the city of Rome: on the left is the genius of the Renaissance, Michelangelo, represented with the sculptor's mallet in his hand; on the right, the young painter Raphael, with his palette and brushes.

On the occasion of the Jubilee year 2000, when some thirty million people visited the Vatican, an imposing and extremely modern entrance was opened to the left of the earlier one. This great bronze portal is the work of the sculptor Cecco Bonanotte, and its square panels symbolise the theme of Creation: space and life.


S IACOBUS MAIOR APOS
S PHILIPPUS APOSTOLUS

THE PICTURE GALLERY

This holds paintings and tapestries from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries. Works from the various schools and by individual artists are exhibited in the gallery's rooms in chronological order.

The earliest *Quadreria*, or picture-collection, was set up in 1790 by Pope PiusVI and temporarily housed on the site of what is now the Gallery of the Tapestries.

The work of architect Luca Beltrami, the Picture Gallery's present building was opened on 27 October 1932.

The Stefaneschi Triptych *c.* 1315
Giotto (*c.* 1267–1337)
Tempera on wood, 178 × 252 cm
Room II

The fourteenth-century writer and painter Cennino Cennini recalls that Giotto 'altered the art of painting from Greek into Latin, and rendered it modern', which is to say that he brought about the transition from Byzantine forms to Italian ones, making art 'modern'. Giotto can indeed be regarded as the founder of Italian pictorial language. He enacted the move away from the abstract idealisations of Byzantine art, counterposing them with a deeply felt and corporeal humanity and plasticity of forms.

This triptych (made up of three panels, painted on the front and back) is a typical example. The gold background of the panels is in fact Byzantine, whereas the discovery of perspective, clearly visible in the predella of the throne and in the floor, and the bodily forms of the figures participating in the event, is thoroughly 'Italian'.

Detail showing the great frame

The great triptych, a gift of Cardinal Jacopo Caetani Stefaneschi, was commissioned for the high altar of the old basilica of Saint Peter, which was erected by order of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century AD. In surviving documents, the triptych is described as being surrounded by an enormous frame of gilded wood in pure Gothic style, with three spires and numerous pinnacles.

The great frame, which impressed the countless pilgrims to the basilica with its majesty, was lost, but its image is still visible, painted in the central panel of the triptych. Cardinal Stefaneschi, on the left, is presenting the triptych and the frame to Saint Peter, who is seated on the throne.

Scenes from the Legend of Saint Nicholas 1437
Fra Angelico (*c.* 1395/1400–1455)
Tempera on wood, 33 × 63 cm
First panel, Room III

The painter Guido di Pietro, a Dominican friar, was called Fra Angelico because of the spirituality that emanates from his works. What is striking about the artist is his ability to inscribe the mystical and still Gothic stylisation of forms into a context where Renaissance naturalism and a newly invented perspectival structure are present.

These features are evident in this panel, which shows three episodes in the life of Saint Nicholas, who was born at Myra in Turkey around 270.

The first episode shows a miracle performed by the extremely precocious saint, who, as a newborn child, was able to stand up the first time he was given a bath.

In the second episode the young Nicholas is shown at the moment when, listening to the preaching of a bishop, he feels the calling of his priestly vocation. Note the mystical colour of the light, the ideal beauty of the human figures and houses and the interesting use of perspective.

The final episode represented in the painting is one of the most famous in the life of the bishop and saint. We see the interior of a house where a father is grief stricken and despairing with his three young daughters. This man has lost all his possessions and is no longer able to provide the young girls with dowries; as a result they will be unable to marry and will be doomed to a life of poverty and perhaps prostitution. Without letting himself be seen, the young bishop Nicholas throws three bags of gold into the house, providing the dowries that will enable the girls to marry and live honourably.

Over the centuries the story of a character named Saint Nicholas (or Saint Nicolaus), usually represented by other artists as an old man with a long white beard, dressed in red (the colour of a bishop's robes) and secretly bearing gifts to young people, has inspired the famous figure of Santa Claus, otherwise known as Father Christmas.

Scenes from the Legend of Saint Nicholas 1437
Fra Angelico (*c.* 1395/1400–1455)
Tempera on wood, 33 × 63 cm
Second panel, Room III

The second panel shows a scene at sea, its depth of field emphasised by the diagonal arrangement of the figures.

This represents two episodes involving miracles performed by Saint Nicholas that took place after his death.

On the left side Saint Nicholas, recognisable by his halo and bishop's mitre, appears to an imperial servant, dressed in blue, and helps him to find the grain necessary to save Mira, the saint's native city, from famine.

On the right side, separated from the left by an astonishing line of phantasmagorical rocks in fairy-tale shapes and colours, we can see Saint Nicholas, patron saint of sailors, being called upon by mariners terrified by a sudden storm. The saint eventually pacifies the waves and brings the ship to safety.

Angel as Musician Playing a Lute *c.* 1480
Melozzo da Forlì (1438–1494)
Detached fresco, 101 × 70 cm
Room IV

The foreshortened figures – that is to say, with an exaggerated perspective – and the colours in the work of Melozzo degli Ambrosi, better known as Melozzo da Forlì, provided the foundations for the development of Italian art in the century that followed.

Outstanding examples of this are Melozzo's representations of saints and angels as musicians, painted around 1480 for the apse of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Rome. In 1711 the frescoes were removed and fortunately saved after unnecessary work was carried out to widen the apse. The angels are some of the finest ever painted, and particularly noteworthy is this fragment with the angel dressed in blue and white, absorbed in playing the lute. It is striking for the boldness of the foreshortening and the keenness of the angel's gaze.

Winged Angel as Musician *c.* 1480
Melozzo da Forlì (1438–1494)
Detached fresco, 113 × 91 cm
Room IV

This fragment with an angel dressed in red and yellow, depicted playing a stringed instrument with a bow, is also of great beauty. It is impossible not to admire its sweet and intent expression.

If we take a closer look at these angels we can gain a better understanding of the fresco technique. A pre-defined section of the wall's surface (about one square metre) was plastered, and it was quickly painted over while still wet, so that the colour penetrated to a depth of around a millimetre. As it dried, the hydrated lime of the plaster combined with the carbon dioxide in the air to form a solid layer of coloured calcium carbonate. The fundamental characteristic of fresco is that the coloured pigment, though thick and solid, retains its colour permanently, as ancient frescoes demonstrate. For painters, the challenge lies in the fact that, once the fresco has dried, it cannot be corrected in any way; the artist has no scope whatsoever to revise his work.


TEMPLA DOMVM EXPOSITIS VICOS FORA MOENIA PONTES
VIRGINEAM TRIVII QVOD REPARARIS AQVAM
PRISCA LICET NAVTIS STATVAS DARE COMMODA PORTVS

Sixtus IV and Plàtina 1477
Melozzo da Forlì (1438–1494)
Fresco transferred on to canvas, 370 × 315 cm
Room IV

In 1477 Melozzo da Forlì painted this magnificent fresco, which depicts the appointment of the humanist Bartolomeo Sacchi, known as Plàtina, as Director of the Vatican Library.

Note the monumental tone of the composition, the figures of which are framed within a solemn architectural setting. Also note the attention to detail visible in the coffered ceiling, with its ornamentation of classical rosettes. The gilded mouldings converge in rigorous perspective toward a single vanishing point. Seated on the right is the pontiff Sixtus IV, who, in 1480, commissioned the building of the famous chapel which would take its name from him: the Sistine Chapel.

Standing opposite the Pope is his nephew, Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, a hugely important figure in the history of art and of the Renaissance in Rome. He was later elected pope, and as Pope Julius II he ordered Bramante to destroy the old Basilica of Saint Peter, constructed by the Emperor Constantine, and to replace it with a new and grander building. It was also Giuliano della Rovere who, as Pope, asked Raphael to decorate the famous Stanze, and Michelangelo to paint the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Behind the cardinal, Plàtina is shown kneeling, pointing to the inscription that records his appointment.

Both the Pope and the Cardinal belonged to the della Rovere family, whose coat of arms was an oak tree (in Italian, rovere*) with acorns. Painted on the two elegant pilasters either side of the fresco are long garlands laden with acorns, an allusion to the family's insignia.*

The Transfiguration 1520
Raphael (1483–1520)
Oil on wood, 410 × 279 cm
Room VIII

This is one of Raphael's best-known works. The great artist died in 1520, at the age of only 37, before he could complete it. Because of the beauty of its colours, its formal perfection and its almost tangible spirituality, this painting can be regarded as Raphael's artistic and religious testament.

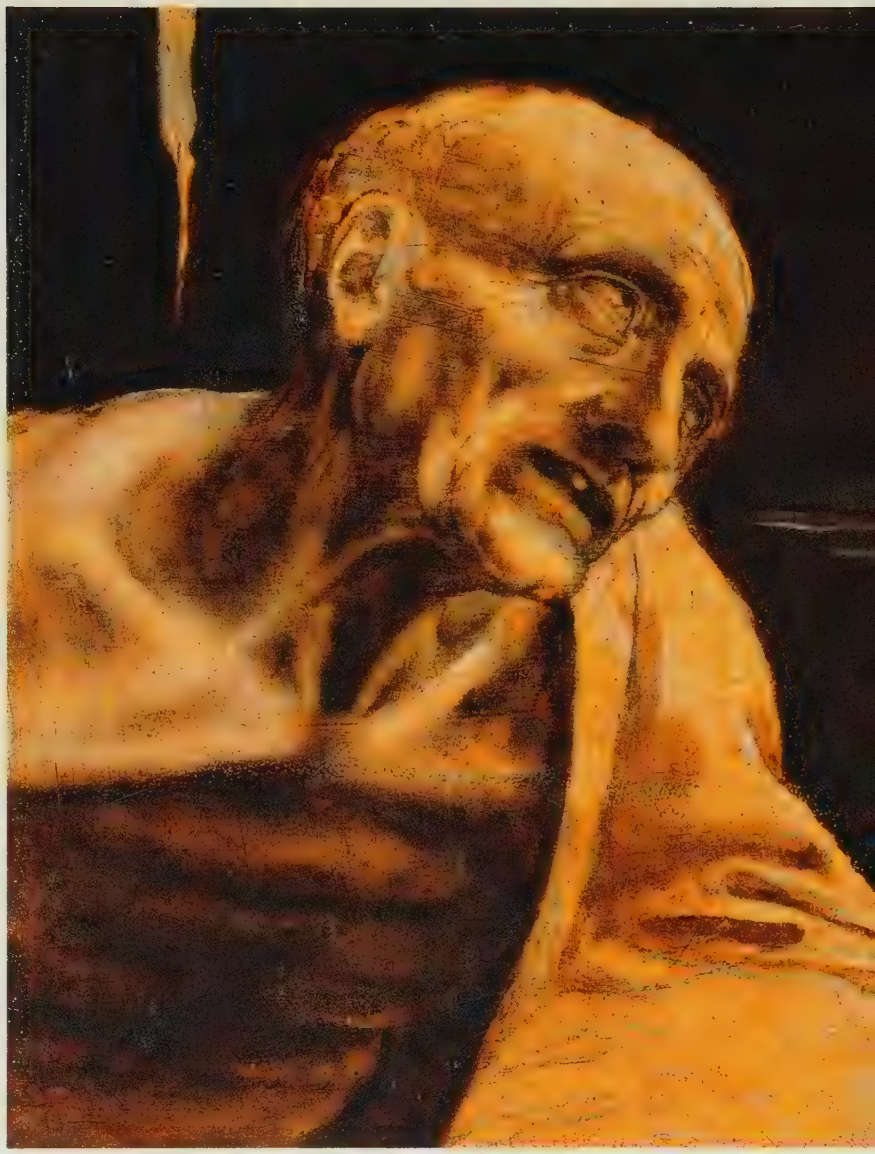
The picture seems almost to be divided into two parts, one above the other, depicting two episodes described in the Gospels. Not long before his crucifixion Jesus asked the apostles Peter, James and John to accompany him to the summit of Mount Tabor. The Gospels tell us that here Jesus was transfigured and appeared bathed in light, in conversation with Moses and the prophet Elijah. This sight frightened the apostles and at the same time gave them heart.

The lower part of the picture shows a young man 'possessed' by the devil, his face and body distorted by the struggle with the demon inside him. The man's parents and relatives beg the apostles for help. The beautiful female figure in the foreground almost certainly represents Faith. She too invites Christ's disciples to action. The apostles point to Jesus, who actually expels the demon.

In this final work Raphael shows how, after seeing the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, he has completely understood and assimilated Michelangelo's extraordinary new artistic message. All the figures are powerfully rendered – Faith has the strength and beauty of a Sibyl painted by Michelangelo. Raphael came close to finishing this work, and it was subsequently completed by his pupils.

The sixteenth-century painter and architect Georgio Vasari, known principally as a writer, knew the great artists of his day and described their works. In his book Lives of the Artists, *he recorded that, when Raphael died, his colleagues placed this marvellous work on his funeral bier to show the people of Rome the extraordinary mastery of the dead artist: 'the sight of that living picture, in contrast with the dead body, caused the hearts of all who beheld it to burst with sorrow'.*

Saint Jerome *c.* 1480
Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)
Oil on wood, 103 × 75 cm
Room IX



This is a magnificent unfinished work by the great artist and scientist Leonardo da Vinci. It is a monochrome sketch, on wood, showing two figures placed diagonally in a rocky landscape. Saint Jerome, the translator of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, is depicted just as he is about to beat his breast with a stone as an act of penitence.

At his feet, faintly outlined, is a magnificent lion curling its long tail. Bravely, Saint Jerome had removed a painful thorn from the lion's paw, and the animal remained the Saint's faithful companion for the rest of its life.

Because of the preparatory state at which work on the painting was interrupted, we are able to admire Leonardo's perfect knowledge of anatomy. The light strongly illuminates the figure of the Saint outlined against the dark background of the rocks. The ascetic's wasted and tormented appearance, with his expression of suffering, hollow cheeks, sunken eyes and a mouth reduced to a dark stain, is extremely fine. There is a touch of colour in the landscape, with rocks in the upper left of the painting. On the right we see the design of a church.

If we look at the painting from close up, we can detect the horrifying marks of a square cut around the head of Saint Jerome where it had formerly been removed.

The painting belonged at one time to the Swiss painter Angelica Kauffmann. When she died in 1807, no trace of the picture could be found. Fortunately, the powerful Cardinal Joseph Fesch, uncle of the Emperor Napoleon (who had appointed him French ambassador to the Holy See), managed to recover the two parts into which the painting had in the meantime been divided. He found the larger of these, without the head, in a junk shop, where it was being used as a lid for a chest. He tracked down the other section, the magnificent head, only five years later. Incredibly, it had become the elegant seat of a stool in a cobbler's shop!

The Deposition 1600–1604
Caravaggio (1571–1610)
Oil on canvas, 300 × 203 cm
Room XII

The main artistic innovation of Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio from the place near Milan where he grew up, lies in his use of light. Caravaggio's figures stand out of the shadows in a dramatic and fascinating play of chiaroscuro, light and shade. A striking example can be seen here in his superb *Deposition*.

The figure of Christ is very powerful. His arm is brushing against the tombstone, which appears to come out of the painting and invade the space of the viewer, almost inviting us to enter the picture and participate in the action.

Saint John the Evangelist and Nicodemus, the Pharisee and doctor of law who was a friend of Jesus, together struggle to support the body of Christ, God become man.

The distraught face of the Virgin Mary and the sweetly rendered face of Mary Magdalene are bent towards Jesus. Mary, the wife of Cleopas, is giving vent to her own grief.

There is a violent and extremely beautiful contrast between the strong colours of the garments of John and Nicodemus (dark green, red and brown) and the very intense white of the sheet (the shroud given by Joseph of Arimathea). No other painter has ever succeeded in producing such a dazzling white, created here with the use of poisonous white lead.

If you take a look at the other pictures hanging near the work of this extraordinary artist, you will notice that whenever there is a Caravaggio in a room its power and luminosity almost have the effect of making all the other paintings there disappear.

At one time the naked calves and ankles of Nicodemus, so close to the body of Jesus, were considered 'indecorous'. In fact, this detail confers the qualities of reality and simplicity on to the terrible scene, while the highly symbolic presence of light gives an intense religiosity that none of Caravaggio's numerous followers managed to achieve. This is one of the most important and complete works of the artist's mature period. He was only 39 when he died.

The Crucifixion of Saint Peter *c.* 1602
Guido Reni (1575–1642)
Oil on canvas, 305 × 171 cm
Room XII

In the course of his numerous trips to Rome, Guido Reni rediscovered the beauty of classical antiquity, was able to devote himself to the study of Raphael's works and, in particular, to become acquainted with Caravaggio's revolutionary artistic innovations. These influences can be seen in his *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*.

This work is notable for its dramatic depiction of the putting to death of the leader of the apostles, an event that took place on the spot where the Vatican City is now situated.

Around the year 67 AD, *the Emperor Nero had decreed the crucifixion of Peter. Out of humility, the Bishop of Rome declared himself unworthy to die in the same way as Jesus and asked to be crucified upside down. He was later buried in the cemetery that existed at that time beside the Circus of Nero. The great Basilica of Saint Peter was built over his grave.*

THE PIO-CLEMENTINO MUSEUM

Beyond the great Cortile della Pigna we enter the museum founded by Popes Clement XIV and Pious VI to house the masterpieces of ancient Greek and Roman statuary.

Apoxyomenos (Athlete Washing Himself) first century AD
Roman copy of an original bronze by Lysippus (fourth century BC)
Marble, height 205 cm

This wonderful marble statue shows an athlete washing himself after a contest. He is using the *strigil*, an implement shaped like a long curved spoon, which was used at the baths and at the *palaestra* (gymnasium) to remove sweat after the body was covered with oil and pumice powder.

The slender proportions of the body of the *Apoxyomenos*, the moving expression of the face and the boldness with which the figure dominates the space around it are characteristic of Lysippus' work.

Lysippus, the renowned Greek sculptor of the fourth century BC, was the favourite artist of Alexander the Great, for whom he sculpted numerous portraits.

The original bronze by the great Greek sculptor, which must have been astonishingly beautiful, adorned the baths of Agrippa in Rome and was seen and described by Pliny the Elder. Ancient chronicles record that the Emperor Tiberius moved the magnificent statue to have it installed in his imperial residence, but a threatening outcry from the citizens of Rome forced him to return it to its original position. Alas, the bronze disappeared, perhaps being melted down by the barbarians during one of the numerous sacks of Rome.

This marvellous Roman copy from the first century AD was also lost. It was found again in Rome in 1849, in an alley in Trastevere, which later took its name from the statue and became Vicolo dell'Atleta.

Spiral stairway sixteenth century
Donato Bramante (1444–1514)

Pope Julius II asked the great architect Donato Bramante, who was engaged in building the new Basilica of Saint Peter's for him, to think of a way in which he might easily reach the upper floors of the small Belvedere Palace from the Vatican Gardens. Bramante produced a plan and, around 1511, began the construction of this innovative and elegant spiral stairway, which could be negotiated on horseback or riding a mule. The stairway was finished by Pirro Ligorio in 1564.

Following the precepts laid down in the first century BC by the Roman architect Vitruvius, Bramante employed three Classical orders of architecture. He used Tuscan columns (Doric columns resting on a base) for the lower part of the stairway, Ionic columns with volutes for the middle part and Corinthian columns with acanthus leaves for the upper part.

THE OCTAGONAL COURTYARD

This was built by Bramante in the fifteenth century, but was completely altered by Michelangelo Simonetti in 1772.

The great Renaissance Pope, Julius II, had the Greek and Roman statues that he owned installed in this courtyard, along with those he later acquired. He invited artists to admire them, and, dazzled by the beauty of the statues, they set out to imitate them; Michelangelo himself was fascinated by them. In this way, the courtyard undoubtedly contributed to the development of the Renaissance in Italy.

The most renowned masterpieces of classical sculpture in the Vatican Museums are still housed in this courtyard.

The Apollo Belvedere second century AD
Roman copy of a Greek original by Leochares (fourth century BC)
Marble, height 224 cm
The Octagonal Courtyard

The statue takes its name from the small Palace of the Belvedere, so called because of the beautiful view of Rome that can be enjoyed from its windows.

It depicts the god Apollo, the divine archer, checking that the arrow he has just shot has hit its target.

The original from which this Roman copy derives was almost certainly the beautiful Greek statue in bronze by Leochares (a collaborator of Scopas and Lysippus) that the Greek historian Pausanias had admired and described in the second century BC as one of the principal ornaments of the Agora in Athens.

This Roman copy from the second century AD is striking for the lightness with which Apollo's cloak rests on his left arm. The albeit unknown Roman copyist managed to render the softness of the fabric through an extraordinarily delicate sculpting of the marble.

As part of Julius II's original collection, during the Neo-classical period (from the mid-eighteenth century), the statue was regarded as one of the supreme examples of formal perfection and technical virtuosity. In 1764 the celebrated art historian Winckelmann described the *Apollo Belvedere* as 'the highest ideal of art of all the masterpieces of antiquity which have escaped destruction'.

The left hand and the right arm of the statue were missing when it was discovered, and these were added in 1532 by Giovanni Angelo da Montorsoli. He made an error, however, in positioning the arm, which must have fallen in a more relaxed pose against the right side. In 1924 Montorsoli's additions were removed from the statue because they were deemed not to be in harmony with the rest of the work, but in 1999 they were again attached.

Hermes second century AD
Roman copy from a bronze original of the school of Praxiteles (fourth century BC)
Marble, height 210 cm
The Octagonal Courtyard

The beautiful but sad face identifies this as a statue of Hermes (Mercury in Roman mythology) as the Psychopompos, the deity who 'accompanies' souls beyond the grave.

It was found near Castel Sant' Angelo in the sixteenth century, since when it has always inspired admiration for its beauty and formal perfection; the French painter Nicolas Poussin called it 'the most perfect example of the male body'.

Laocoön first century AD
Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydoros of Rhodes
Marble, height 214 cm
The Octagonal Courtyard

This beautiful statue depicts Laocoön, priest of the city of Troy during the siege of the city by the Greeks. He tried to persuade the Trojans not to bring inside the city the great wooden horse left near the beach by Ulysses. To prevent the priest from saving Troy, the goddess Athena, protector of the Greeks, brought out of the sea two enormous serpents, which killed Laocoön and his two sons.

The sculpture was seen in Rome, in the Palace of the Emperor Titus, by the writer Pliny the Elder who, in *Natural History* XXXVI, 37, described it with enthusiasm as 'superior to any other work of sculpture present in the city'. According to Pliny it was the work of the sculptor Agesander of Rhodes in collaboration with his two sons, Athenodoros and Polydoros. Recently their names have been identified on the marble group of *Ulysses* that has been brought back to the grotto of Tiberius at Sperlonga, but some doubt remains as to whether the three artists should be regarded as the originators of the statue or as copyists, and therefore whether the *Laocoön* should be considered a Hellenistic Greek original of the first century AD sculpted by them, or a copy, made by them in marble, of a bronze model from the second century BC.

At the end of the Roman Empire, the *Laocoön* was lost. It was recovered, only in 1506, near the Domus Aurea of Nero.

The heroic nudity of the Trojan priest, his powerful musculature, the anatomical detail and pulsing veins were admired by the artists of the Renaissance and influenced work by many of them, particularly Michelangelo, who made various drawings of this splendid sculpture. Recently, beneath the New Sacristy of the Medici church of San Lorenzo in Florence, a charcoal sketch of the *Laocoön* by Michelangelo was discovered. We should remember that the great Florentine artist began work on his frescoes in the Sistine Chapel only two years after the return of the *Laocoön*.

The statue was found with the right arm missing and the Renaissance sculptor Giovanni Angelo da Montorsoli made a new arm for it. He made the serious mistake, however, of sculpting it in an extended pose, whereas the original arm of the statue had been bent at the elbow.

It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that the archaeologist Ludwig Pollak came across a 'bent' arm that dated from antiquity in a marble worker's studio. This was almost certainly the lost original, and in 1960 it was reattached to the statue.

A marble arm of the Laocoön*, sketched in the style of the great Michelangelo (or, as some believe, by Baccio Bandinelli), is now 'hidden' behind the statue, held up by two metal braces. It is unfortunate that a Renaissance work should not occupy a more prominent position, especially since it offers astonishing proof that the artist had understood that the arm was bent, not extended, four centuries before Pollak's discovery.*

Ideally, one day it will be possible to see the Renaissance arm placed in front of the Laocoön, perhaps inside a protective glass case.


VENERI FELICI SACRVM

The Toilet of Venus second century AD
Roman statue, after the *Aphrodite* of Cnidus by Praxiteles (fourth century BC)
Marble, height 214 cm
The Octagonal Courtyard

This Roman statue depicts Venus as she prepares to step into the water with her young son Eros. It is clearly a Roman variant of the extremely famous *Aphrodite* commissioned from the great Greek sculptor Praxiteles by the inhabitants of the wealthy Greek colony of Cnidus.

The original statue provoked much scandal when it was presented to the public; this was the first time that a divinity had been depicted naked. Yet its stupefying beauty and divine expression, which could not be offended by any human gaze, meant that it was immediately deemed a masterpiece.

If we look at Venus *closely we can recognise the face of Faustina the younger, wife of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and mother of the appalling Commodus (the young emperor immortalised in the film* Gladiator*). The face bears a strong resemblance to the three busts held in the Capitoline Museums in Rome, the Louvre in Paris and the Istanbul Museum, as well as the coins issued by Marcus Aurelius in honour of his adored wife.*

THE SALA DEGLI ANIMALI

Having crossed the Octagonal Courtyard, we find the Sala degli Animali, which houses an interesting collection of Roman sculptures of wild beasts and domesticated animals.These were extensively restored by the Tuscan sculptor Francesco Antonio Franzoni (1734–1818).

Meleager second century AD
Roman copy of a Greek model by Scopas (fourth century BC)
Marble, height 210 cm

The Greek hero Meleager has just killed and decapitated the fearsome wild boar that devastated the countryside around the city of Calydon in Greece. Note the depiction of his faithful hunting dog.

This is a fine copy of the famous bronze statue by the great sculptor Scopas.

THE SALA DELLE MUSE

This room, with its sixteen Corinthian columns, was designed around 1780 by the Neo-classical architect Michelangelo Simonetti (1724–1781). It takes its name from the statues of the nine *Muses* which encircle that of *Apollo Playing the Lyre*. Six of these fine sculptures from the second century AD were found in 1774 in the Villa di Cassio near Tivoli. The frescoes and the draperies on the ceiling are by Tommaso Conca (1734–1822).

In the centre of the room is the wonderful *Belvedere Torso*, moved there from outside in 1973 to protect it from the elements.

The Belvedere Torso first century BC
Apollonios of Athens
Marble, height 159 cm

Written in Greek, the artist's signature can be read in the middle of the rock which supports the bust: 'Apollonios – (son) of Nestor – An Athenian — made this'. The *Torso* is one of very few signed Greek originals.

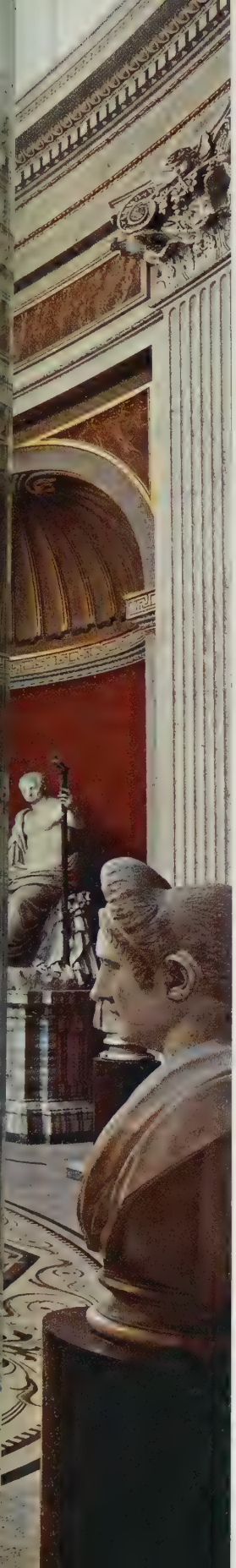
The *Torso*, a headless and limbless statue, amazes by the power conveyed in the active musculature and by its forceful and perfect form. It shows a human figure, heroically naked, sitting on a rock that is covered with a feline skin, which has recently been identified by scholars as that of a panther.

Who is the hero depicted in the *Torso*? According to different hypotheses the figure could be Hercules, Ajax or Telamon. May opinion is that it represents Philoctetes, the Greek archer and friend of Ulysses, who was abandoned, wounded, on the island of Lemnos. His powerful torso is turned left, and his muscles are tensed, as he tries to raise himself. Unable to use his wounded leg, he supports himself whith a spear, held vertically in both hands on his left side.

This extremely beautiful maimed statue was admired and studied by Michelangelo, who was sensitive to the human body and its movement in space. The great Florentine artist refused to complete the statue by adding limbs and a head.

Michelangelo did not make any direct alterations to the statue, but he did reproduce it in complete form in a painting in the Sistine Chapel. It can be seen among the Ignudi, *the twenty nudes that frame the entire central vault that depicts the Creation. The bust and the right leg of the nudes always form an angle of ninety degrees, as in the forceful statue of the* Belvedere Torso.

In 1876 the Torso *was also admired by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, who sculpted a complete version cast in bronze: the celebrated* Thinker.



THE SALA ROTONDA

From the Neo-classical period, this room was created around 1779 by the architect Michelangelo Simonetti (1724–1781). The dome takes its inspiration from that of the Pantheon. Niches with walls painted in Pompeii red, surmounted by great gilded seashells, are set between fluted pilasters crowned with composite capitals (a fusion of Ionic and Corinthian capitals).

There is a fine mosaic floor made with tesserae of coloured marble from Otricoli, a town to the north of Rome. At its centre is a splendid monolithic *tazza*, or bowl, of red porphyry, one of the hardest types of volcanic rock.

In one of the niches is the colossal statue in gilded bronze of Hercules, young and unbearded, with his club and the skin of the Nemean Lion, which, according to mythology, he killed and flayed.

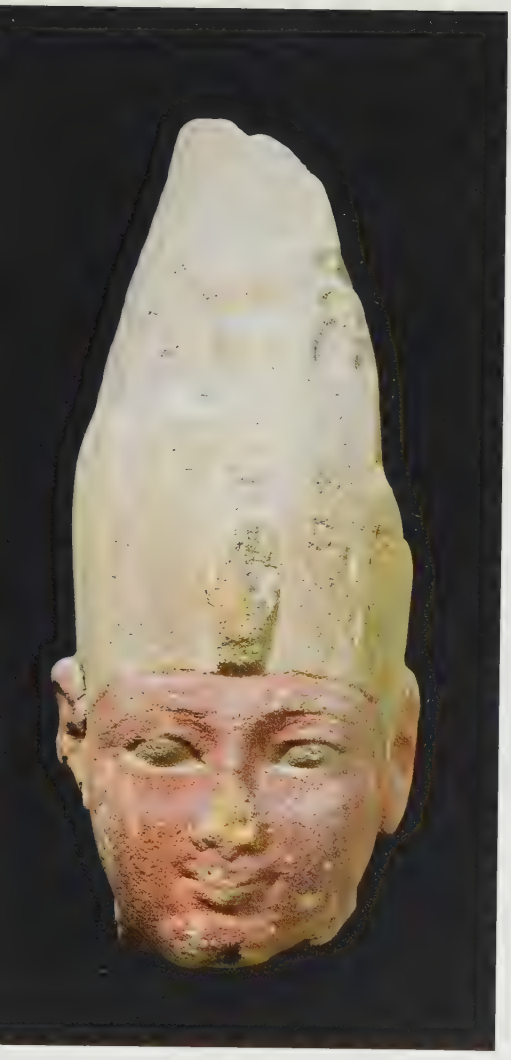
THE SALA A CROCE GRECA

This takes its name specifically from the room's shape, which is in the form of a Greek cross, that is with all four arms of equal length (like the shape of the mathematical + sign). This room was built around 1780 by the architect Michelangelo Simonetti, during the papacy of Pius VI.

The Sarcophagus of Saint Helen fourth century AD
Porphyry, 242 cm x 268 cm x 184 cm

This majestic sarcophagus of red porphyry, the imperial stone, was originally created for a Roman emperor, perhaps Constantius Chlorus, the father of Constantine. We can see this from the figures of Roman horsemen and barbarian prisoners in high relief. It was eventually used, however, by Saint Helen, the mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor.

In the year 326 Helen undertook a long pilgrimage to the East to visit the holy places of Christianity. According to tradition, in Jerusalem, while overseeing the demolition of the Roman temple built to conceal the Holy Sepulchre, she found the True Cross, which had been buried by the apostles beside the sepulchre itself. Sacred relics of the Cross are today venerated in Rome at the Church Santa Croce in Gerusalemme and in Saint Peter's basilica.



After Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798–99, and the diffusion of numerous illustrations produced by the artists Napoleon had taken with him, the kingdom of the Pharaohs became fashionable. Egyptian Museums were established in every major city in Europe, and all the great European captials began importing Egyptian statues to furnish their museums. In 1839 Pope Gregory XVI perspicaciously assembled the sculptures the ancient Romans had brought back to Rome from Egypt, laying the foundations of the present museum.

Head of King Mentuhotep *c.* 2050 BC
Painted limestone, height 62 cm
Room V – semicircular

One of the most important portraits in the Egyptian Museum is undoubtedly that of King Mentuhotep, ruler of Thebes, of the eleventh dynasty. History records him as the sovereign who, after long years of conflict, reunited Upper and Lower Egypt (the country's southern and northern regions).

The head was almost certainly sculpted before the reunification of the two kingdoms, because the King is wearing only the white crown of Upper Egypt (conical in shape), which is not yet joined to the red crown of Lower Egypt.

This is the oldest portrait in the Vatican Museums and one of the oldest in the world.

The great King Mentuhotep reigned for more than 50 years. He is often incorrectly designated as Pharaoh Mentuhotep, but the term 'pharaoh' was used for the sovereign of Egypt only from the start of the eighteenth dynasty in the sixteenth century BC. On the front of the crown is the Uraeus, the jewel in the form of a cobra's head that adorned the brow of Egyptian monarchs, indicating their vast authority. The King's beautiful face, with just a hint of a smile, expresses a great tranquillity and serene power. The original colours are still preserved after more than 4,000 years.

THE ETRUSCAN MUSEUM

This was established by Pope Gregory XVI in 1837 to assemble what was left by the Etruscans, an ancient people whose culture so much influenced the Romans. These objects came to light during the excavations made in the territory of the Papal States.

The Fibula seventh century BC
Gold leaf, height 32 cm
Room II

This large gold fibula or clasp, discovered in 1836, belonged to an Etruscan princess who lived around 650 BC. It was a very large and rich ornament to be worn on ceremonial occasions. It is so long that in order to be worn without inhibiting movement, it was divided into three hinged parts.

The quality of craftsmanship is astounding. The upper part depicts five lions embossed in relief, worked in gold leaf and welded to the fibula.

The minute broken lines which decorate the two horizontal semicylinders of the central part of the fibula are a remarkable example of the still mysterious procedure of 'granulation', which involved welding together microscopic pellets of gold (a magnifying glass is useful for appreciating the fineness of this work).

It is still a matter of conjecture how the Etruscans could create such tiny and perfect spheres of gold, and how these did not fuse and become spoiled in the process of welding them together and onto the great fibula. The numerous attempts made in modern times to achieve the refinement attained by the Etruscans in the working of gold fall far short of the perfection arrived at 2,650 years ago.

The lower part of the fibula is even more astonishing. It is decorated with 55 tiny ducks in the round. These were made by welding together the two halves of each duck, embossed with a fine gold leaf and each covered with microscopic droplets of granulated gold.

The Mars of Todi late fifth century BC
Bronze, height 142 cm
Room III

This beautiful statue, a rare example of an Etruscan work in bronze, depicts a warrior, or perhaps Mars, the god of war himself.

Leaning on a lance with his left hand, and pouring out a libation with his right hand, he is about to go into battle. On his head he once wore a helmet, which has sadly not been recovered. A dedicatory inscription in the Umbrian language reads: AHAL TRUTITIS DUNUM DEDE (AHAL TRUTITIS OFFERED THIS GIFT). The statue was found in 1837 near Todi in Perugia.

Try to picture the helmet and the spear where they would have been and you will be able to appreciate how profound the contacts between the Greek and Etruscan cultures must have been at the end of the fifth century BC, and the extent of Greek influence on Etruscan art, particularly in the shaping of the body and face.

THE COLLECTION OF GREEK VASES

Exhibited in the final section of the Etruscan Museum are some astonishing Greek vases. These were acquired more than 2,400 years ago by wealthy Etruscans as adornments for their homes and later for their tombs.

The majority of Greek vases on show in museums throughout the world have come from excavations carried out in the Etruscan tomb sites of Italy. Two of the finest of those still in existence are exhibited in the Vatican Museums.

Amphora with Achilles and Ajax 540–530 BC
Exekias (documented 550–525 BC)
Height 61 cm
Room XII – semicircular

This beautiful amphora, made in Attica, the region around Athens, is one of only three examples, left in the world, of pots personally thrown and painted by the great Greek painter and ceramicist Exekias, who is known to have been active between 550 and 525 BC.

An amphora is a vase, or pot, with two handles set vertically on either side of the neck. The name derives from the Greek prefix amphi, which means double or placed on both sides; other instances of its use are amphitheatre (double theatre) and amphibious (double life). Amphoras were used in antiquity to contain and transport liquids and cereals.

This is a stupendous example of a 'black-figured vase', a technique in which Exekias was one of the greatest specialists. It involved painting figures in black on the vase, and drawing, or rather incising, the details (eyes, beards, cloaks, etc.) by gouging out the black colour with a sharp metal point. The painted figures thus stand out in black against the red background of the terracotta.

Depicted on the amphora are the two Greek heroes Achilles and Ajax engaged intensely in a board game. On their heads their names are written in Greek.

It is easy to recognise the austere and solemn style of the great Exekias, even when the subject involved is light, as in this case.

The two heroes are conversing. Coming out of their mouths are the words tèssara *('four') and* tria *('three'). This is undoubtedly one of the oldest examples of the cartoon strip.*

What game are the two heroes engaged in playing? Archaeologists are still divided in their opinions. Is it a game of dice? Their words suggest this, but it could also be a game of morra, in which each player quickly has to guess the number of fingers the other holds up, or even an ancient type of backgammon. Whatever it was, the game must have been really engrossing, judging by the expression of the two heroes, although they have not abandoned their spears and shields!

Hydria with Apollo 500–480 BC
The 'Berlin Painter'
Height 52 cm
Room XXI

The Hydria (from the Greek *hydor*, water) is a pot with three handles. The two handles set horizontally on the sides were used to lift it; the one set vertically higher on the back was for drawing and pouring water.

This pot was painted in Athens by the 'Berlin Painter', an anonymous artist given this name because another famous pot by him is held in the Berlin Museum. His style is recognisable from the intense and almost luminous black against which a single large figure in light red stands out.

Our hydria is an excellent example of the 'red-figured vase', a technique introduced in the final decades of the sixth century BC, which is completely different from the earlier 'black-figured' technique. Figures are outlined with black pigment and become red during the firing of the clay. The details are not incised with a metal point but painted, with greater refinement and precision, in black, using a brush small enough to bring out, for example, facial expressions or fine delicate folds in a veil.

Depicted on this hydria is the god Apollo, flying on a great winged tripod over the ocean, symbolised by fish.

This is almost like a 2,500-year-old depiction of a flying saucer! Judging by the god's serene expression, there can be no doubt that his journey is extremely comfortable. With his bow and arrows tucked into the quiver slung on his back, Apollo is blissfully playing the lyre.

GALLERY OF THE CANDELABRA

The gallery is so called because of the large Roman candelabra in marble which are set against the columns that divide and enhance the gallery. In ancient Rome the poor used oil lamps, but the well-off illuminated their homes with great column-like candlesticks that were richly sculpted and topped with a metal receptacle containing oil or wax.

Mosaic with Still Life mid-second century AD

Roman mosaics were formed from little squares of coloured marble known as tesserae (the Greek *tèssara* means 'four', so the word refers to the four sides of each square). At the centre of the floor there would be an 'emblem', or ornament, made with smaller tesserae, in a mosaic of black and white or other colours.

This emblem of the second century AD was found in 1817 outside the Porta San Sebastiano at Tor Marancia.

Against a light background we see a plucked hen, three fishes, a basket with cuttlefish and shrimps, a cluster of dates and bunches of asparagus.

Note the extraordinary liveliness of the colours and their shadings to convey the impression of depth. The fine detail achieved with small tesserae is remarkable (note the teeth of the hanging fish), as is the 'modernity' of the composition.

We can only admire the lengths the ancient Romans went to in bringing to Rome these coloured marbles of such astonishing hues.

Exhibited on the left wall are the tapestries executed in the time of the Medici Pope, Clement VII (1523–1534), designed by the pupils of Raphael after their master's premature death.

These were made to be hung on the lower part of the walls of the Sistine Chapel, though only in the winter as a means of insulation against the cold.

The tapestries were woven in Brussels at the workshop of Pieter van Aelst and exhibited for the first time in the Sistine Chapel in 1531.

The Resurrection of Christ sixteenth century Tapestry

This is the largest and most spectacular tapestry held in the gallery.

After three days the great stone that closed the sepulchre was moved away, and Christ reappeared in all his splendour. The Gospels record that the great round stone was rolled against the sepulchre to seal its entrance, but the artist preferred to use a rectangular form.

In the tapestry we see a perfect use of perspectival depth, which, it should be remembered, had been abandoned during the Middle Ages to be rediscovered empirically, first by Giotto and then by the Florentine painters of the fifteenth century.

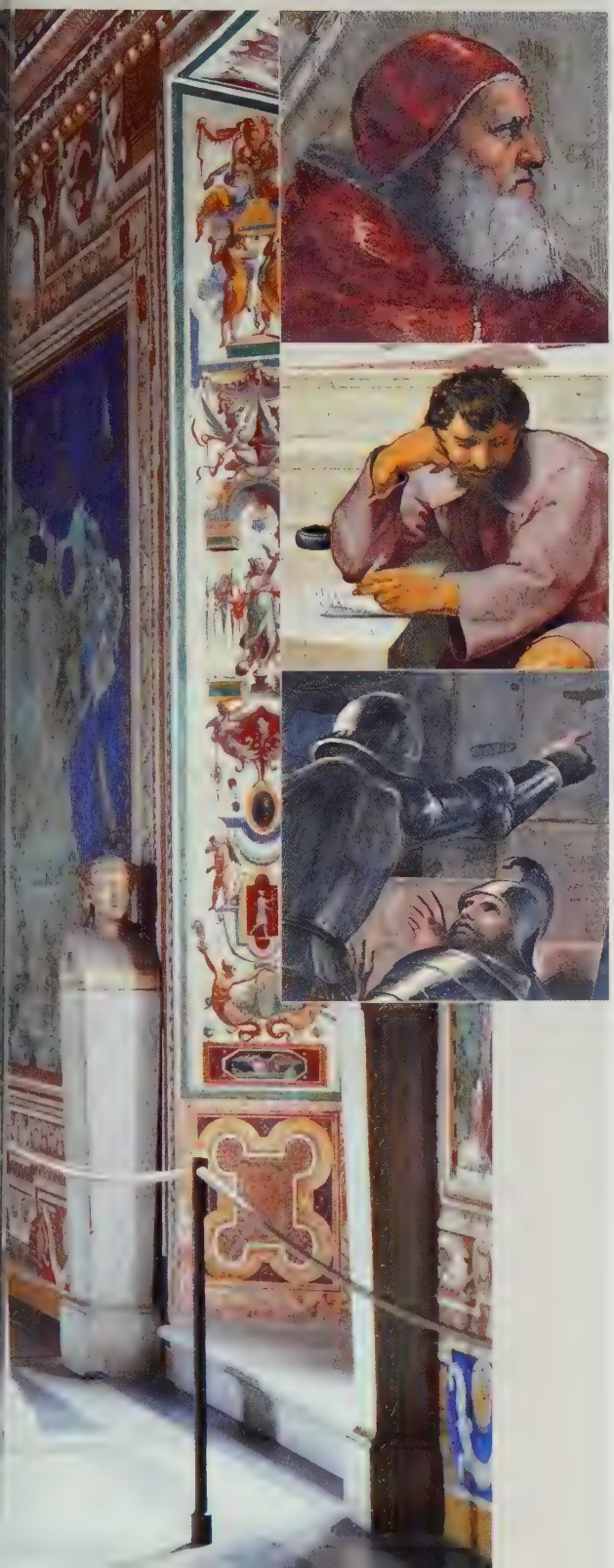
This tapestry does not just demonstrate a good use of perspective, but also, for the first time, and in an extremely striking way, the use of 'shifting perspective'.

As we approach the tapestry from the left, the large rectangular stone that sealed the tomb appears to have fallen in our direction, and Jesus' gaze and right arm are turned toward us. Incredibly, when we move toward the tapestry, the stone appears to move. When we stand directly in front of the tapestry, we will amazed to see that the stone appears in the centre of the tapestry, Jesus' feet are above the stone and his eyes are fixed on us. As we draw away from the tapestry, through the gallery, finally and astonishingly, we will see the stone turned to the right, Jesus' feet resting on the other side of the stone and both his arm and body still turned toward us.

It is interesting to see how many people are so struck by the singularity of this experience that they retrace their own footsteps to verify the incredible shift in perspective.

With the modern technologies of our own day it is extremely hard to achieve a similar effect. This one was created five centuries ago, using silk and wool, but above all with the resources of an incredible mathematical brain!

Former Papal Apartments



The sumptuous Gallery of Maps (opposite) is today a splendid hallway that leads to the former residences of the popes, who embellished the Vatican with Raphael's Stanze and the Sistine Chapel.

The Gallery of Maps was built between 1578 and 1580 by the Bolognese architect Ottaviano Mascherino. It is decorated with 40 maps representing the regions of Italy, arranged from south to north, which were frescoed between 1580 and 1583 by Antonio Danti.

The 'cartoons' (preparatory drawings to be transferred on to the plaster) were prepared by the great mathematician and cosmographer from Perugia, Egnazio Danti, the painter's brother.

There were no means of flight in the sixteenth century, and, for want of aerial views, maps were produced using sextants and other precision instruments of astounding accuracy. Indeed, the maps on display in this gallery are so meticulously precise that foreign visitors with Italian roots often stop in front of their own particular region to locate their original family village.

The barrel-vaulted ceiling, decorated with stucco work and paintings by Girolamo Muziano, Cesare Nebbia and other Mannerist painters and stucco workers, illustrates stories of saints and events that occurred in the regions charted on the walls directly below.

From the gallery windows there is a fine view over the Vatican Gardens and the immense dome of Saint Peter's Basilica.

THE APARTMENTS OF JULIUS II

The great Renaissance pope, Julius II, ascended the papal throne in 1503. He could not bear to stay for long in the papal apartment situated just below these rooms, which had been the abode of his predecessor Alexander VI, the terrible Rodrigo Borgia, who was of Spanish origin. In 1507 the new pontiff moved to the floor above and occupied some rooms there while, as we shall see, on his orders the young Raphael prepared to fresco the rest of the apartments.

THE SALA DI COSTANTINO

This room was intended for the sumptuous official ceremonies of the papal court and for the great receptions in honour of important persons, emperors and kings who were visiting Rome.

It was frescoed by the pupils of Raphael immediately after their master's sudden death, which occurred in 1520 when he was only 37. The absence of the great artist's guiding hand is immediately apparent, since the frescoes lack the grace and magnificence that captivate us in the rooms beyond.

The Battle of the Milvian Bridge after 1520
Giulio Romano (*c.* 1499–1546)
Fresco

The fresco depicts a battle that took place on 28 October 312 AD. On the left we see the soldiers of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Christ's cross has been raised on the military banners.

In the centre, wearing a crown, is the Emperor Constantine on a white horse. On the right is the pagan emperor, Maxentius, who has fallen into the River Tiber, where he eventually drowns.

The work is that of Giulio Romano, one of Raphael's most talented pupils, following a design prepared by his master.

The battle took place around a Roman bridge on the Tiber, Ponte Milvio, taking its name from it. Built in 109 BC, the bridge is still in use today, an example of how monuments built by the ancient Romans have outlasted the centuries.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The Donation of Constantine 1523–24
Giulio Romano (*c.* 1499–1546) and
Giovan Francesco Penni (*c.* 1488–1528)
Fresco

The fresco depicts the scene of the legendary giving of the city of Rome to Pope Sylvester by the Emperor Constantine.

We see the emperor as he presents the Pope with a small statue which represents the eternal city. The pontiff depicted in the fresco has the features of the Medici pope, Clement VII, who occupied the throne of Saint Peter at that time.

The fresco is particularly interesting from a historical point of view, because the scene is set inside the old Basilica of Saint Peter, which was begun by Constantine around the year 324.

At the time when the fresco was painted the old basilica had only recently been demolished and Bramante had begun the construction of the new Basilica of Saint Peter. Clearly visible in the background are the columns of spiralling marble, which, according to tradition, came from the ancient temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

These columns still exist and we shall see them in a different position inside the new basilica.


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THE SALA DEI CHIAROSCURI

The room takes its name from the figures of apostles and saints painted in chiaroscuro by Taddeo and Federico Zuccari in 1560. It was the antechamber of the papal apartment and was used by the Medici pope, Leo X (1513–1521) for meetings and audiences with cardinals who were present in Rome.

Work on the gilded ceiling was done at the time of Leo X (son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, chief of Florence), according to a design by Raphael. Visible on the coffered ceiling is the coat of arms of the Florentine Medici family: a golden shield with the five red balls and one blue ball.

The windows of the Sala dei Chiaroscuri open out onto the stupendous Logge by Raphael.

A door surmounted by the great crest of the della Rovere pope, Julius II, an oak tree with acorns on its branches, leads to the exquisite Chapel of Nicholas V

RAPHAEL'S LOGGIA

The construction of the Loggia was begun in 1508 by the architect Bramante who was at the same time engaged in work on the new Basilica of Saint Peter. On the death of Bramante (1514) the young Raphael was given the task of completing the Loggia, which he did in 1519. Thus, the great painter also proved himself to be an able architect.

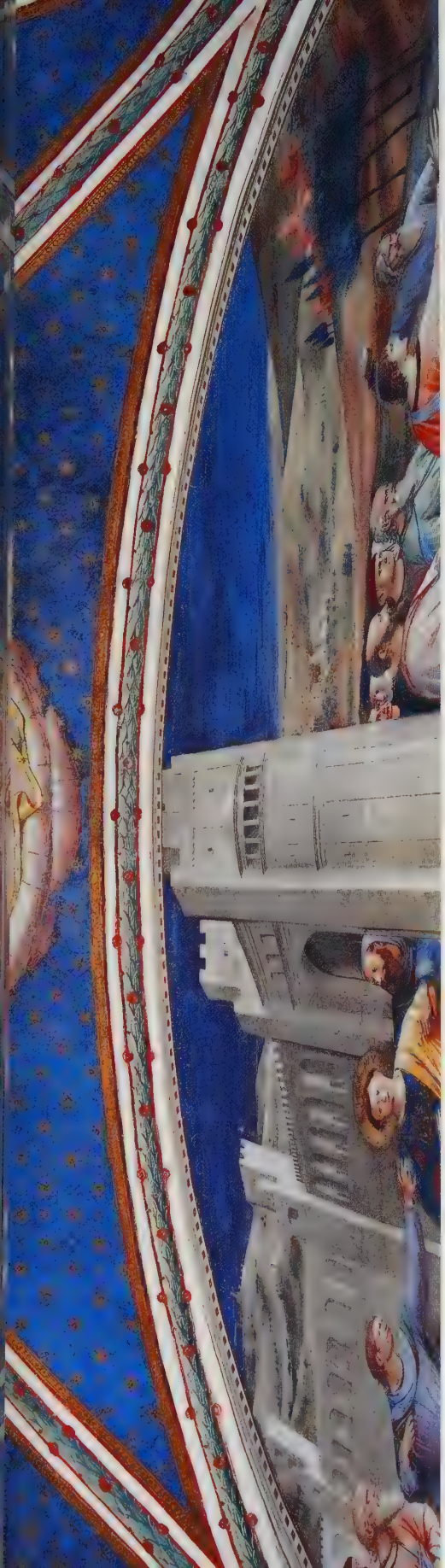
The vault is decorated with scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The preparatory drawings by Raphael were almost totally executed by his most talented pupils — Giulio Romano, Giovan Francesco Penni and Perino del Vaga — under his direct supervision. The exquisite stucco work is by Giovanni da Udine.

Accompanied by his followers, Raphael, who became Superintendent of Antiquities in 1514, would often visit Nero's astonishing Domus Aurea, which had just been discovered after centuries of neglect.

This royal palace had been frescoed by the great Roman painter Fabullus. For the residence of the cruel emperor, whose tastes were nonetheless refined, Fabullus had invented a new kind of pictorial ornamentation consisting of pale mirror-imaged figures shown in a symmetrical right-left pattern against a white background.

After Nero's death, Trajan had the long frescoed corridors filled in with earth and had his great baths built on top of them, thereby burying the imperial palace. Only after fourteen centuries were excavations carried out, enabling artists to enter the long corridors and admire the paintings of Fabullus. They didn't know that this had been Nero's royal palace, and they imagined that they were inside amazing painted galleries or 'grottoes', so they named this new phantasmagorical style grottesco, or 'grotesque'.

If we look at the pilasters of Raphael's Loggia, we notice that they are all painted in imitation of the style that had so enthused artists: symmetrical images painted against a white background. When other artists who had not seen the originals in Nero's residence began to reproduce Renaissance copies, they added other figures and increasingly dense ornamentation in the empty spaces. The new grotesque style eventually became heavy and ridiculous, and the very term 'grotesque' changed in meaning.



THE CHAPEL OF POPE NICHOLAS V

The Chapel was frescoed between 1447 and 1451, on the order of Pope Nicholas V, by the great Tuscan painter Guido di Pietro, known as Fra Angelico.

Visiting this small but marvellous chapel, we can fully understand the atmosphere of simplicity and intense religiosity inhabited by both the artist, a Dominican friar, and his enlightened patron, Nicholas V.

As in the works of Fra Angelico in the Picture Gallery, here too we are struck by a mystical and idealised beauty of the human figure, and of landscapes interpreted and illustrated with a cultural perspective that is extremely modern for its day.

The Vault

The Chapel of Nicholas V is housed in a thirteenth-century tower that is part of the earliest core of the papal palace. On the elegant cross-vaulted ceiling, the four Evangelists stand out against an azure sky studded with golden stars.

Anti-clockwise from below: Saint Luke is reading, with the ox nearby; Saint John, with the eagle, is in a reflective pose; Saint Matthew is looking at the angel in expectation of inspiration; and Saint Mark, with the lion, is engrossed in writing his Gospel.

Saint Stephen Preaching
The Chapel of Pope Nicholas V

Depicted on the upper walls of the Chapel are episodes from the life of Saint Stephen. Having converted to Christianity as a young man, he was one of the first seven deacons elected by the Christian community of Jerusalem to assist the apostles. Taken before the Sanhedrin, he was sentenced to be stoned to death outside the city gate. The execution took place between 31 and 37 AD (Acts 7: 2–56). Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian faith, and for this reason he is sometimes refered to as a 'proto-martyr'.

In this image we see the young man as he preaches to an attentive crowd. Standing on the threshold of a temple, Stephen calmly lists the principles of Christian doctrine; he counts on his fingers for emphasis.

This is a masterpiece of the artist's mature phase. Clearly visible in this image is the influence exerted on Fra Angelico by the frescoes of Masaccio that he had seen and admired in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence.

The Charity of Saint Laurence
The Chapel of Pope Nicholas V

Depicted on the lower part of the walls are episodes from the life of Saint Laurence, a deacon of the Roman Church. The prefect of Rome ordered Laurence to hand over the treasure of the Church, which he had just received from Pope Sixtus II. Laurence distributed what he had received to the destitute and, showing the prefect a crowd of the sick and the poor, told him: 'These are the treasures of the Church'.

Because of this episode he was condemned to be burned alive. His ashes are still preserved in Rome, in a sarcophagus beneath the beautiful Church of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, which is dedicated to him.

In the second image we see Laurence at the door of the temple as he distributes the wealth of the Church to the poor and the sick. Deformities and diseases are only hinted at, with a great delicacy that is typical of Fra Angelico.

RAPHAEL'S STANZE

These magnificent rooms, known as the Stanze, were the papal residence between 1507 and 1585— beginning with the della Rovere pope, Julius II, and ending with the Boncompagni pope, Gregory XIII.

Raphael worked on the rooms from 1508 until his death in 1520. His pupils continued the work, which was completed in 1524.

THE STANZA DI ELIODORO

This was the antechamber of the private apartment of Julius II. It was painted between 1511 and 1514, immediately after Raphael had been able to enter the Sistine Chapel for the first time and admire Michelangelo's frescoes. The influence of the great Florentine artist is apparent in the powerful solidity of the figures. When we look at Raphael's frescoes in this room, we can fully understand what Giorgio Vasari recorded in his book *Lives of the Painters*, writing that after he saw the work of Michelangelo, Raphael 'improved and enlarged his figures, and gave them more majesty'.

In order to appreciate this change in Raphael's style, it would be preferable to see this room after having seen the next one, which precedes it chronologically. Unfortunately, the new one-way itinerary does not allow this.

The fine ceiling, sadly much ruined, may have been the work of Guillaume de Marcillat. Restoration work on the ceiling began in 2003 and has uncovered a vivid blue background for rosettes of gilded wood.

The Liberation of Saint Peter

The scene takes place at night. After Christ's crucifixion, Peter was arrested on the orders of Herod. An angel wakes Peter and frees him from the chains that bind him to the two sleeping guards. An extremely powerful light emanates from the angel and is reflected on the armour.

On the left side we can see the dismayed reaction of the gaolers. The scene is lit in a fantastic manner by several light sources: the torch of the soldier in the foreground, the moon half hidden by the clouds and, most of all, the cold light of dawn.

On the right we see the angel accompanying the aged Saint Peter out of the prison, holding him by the hand.

This is the most technically 'difficult' and the most interesting section of the frescoes. It contains an extraordinary effect of light in motion. If you look carefully at the pillar to the left of the angel, you will see that the light on it gradually builds up. The halo of light emanating from the angel coming towards us illuminates it with ever greater intensity.

These light effects were unparalleled until Caravaggio, and Rembrandt, almost a century later. Without in any way diminishing these two sublime painters of the Baroque period, we must remember that they were painting with oil on canvas, whereas Raphael was using the technique of fresco, which, as we know, allows for no correction of the work in progress.

The Stanza di Eliodoro is currently being 'cleaned'; I prefer to use this term rather than the more commonly employed 'restored' because, in fact, the process is merely a matter of removing, with great expertise, the dust, smoke and grime of centuries, with not a single gram of colour being added. Once the wall has been completely cleaned, and its colours and light effects become once again those created by Raphael, the Liberation of Saint Peter *will almost certainly be regarded as the most beautiful and most famous 'nocturne' of the Italian Renaissance.*


M · D · X · IHI

The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple
The Stanza di Eliodoro

The episode that gives its name to the Stanza di Eliodoro is recorded in the Bible in the Second Book of Maccabees.

Heliodorus of Antioch, chief minister of Seleucus IV Philopator, received an order to take possession of the treasure of the temple at Jerusalem. With the aid of a great many soldiers, he succeeded in doing this, but as soon as he stepped out of the temple he was attacked by a horseman and two young men (three angels sent by God), who put his guards to flight and recovered the gold.

Raphael depicts this episode outside the temple in Jerusalem, while inside it can be seen the priest Onias kneeling before the Menorah, the seven-branched gold candelabra, asking God for help.

The choice of this episode for the fresco is clearly an allusion to the need for Julius II to expel foreigners from Italian territory and internal enemies from the territories of the Church.

Note the effect of reflected light on the gilded vaults of the temple.

Detail showing Julius II

As if depicting his own wish to watch over the destinies of the Church, Pope Julius II had his portrait inserted into this episode. He appears on the left, sitting on the *sedia gestatoria* and carried on the shoulders of the 'chair-bearers', the Roman nobles assigned to this task. It should be pointed out that the use of the *sedia gestatoria* was abolished by Pope John XXIII (1958–1963).

Julius II seems decisive and 'strong-willed'. It was he who forced Bramante to destroy the old Basilica of Saint Peter and erect a bigger church; it was he who asked Michelangelo to fresco the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, transforming him by force from a sculptor into a painter; and it was he again who asked Raphael to fresco these magnificent Stanze.

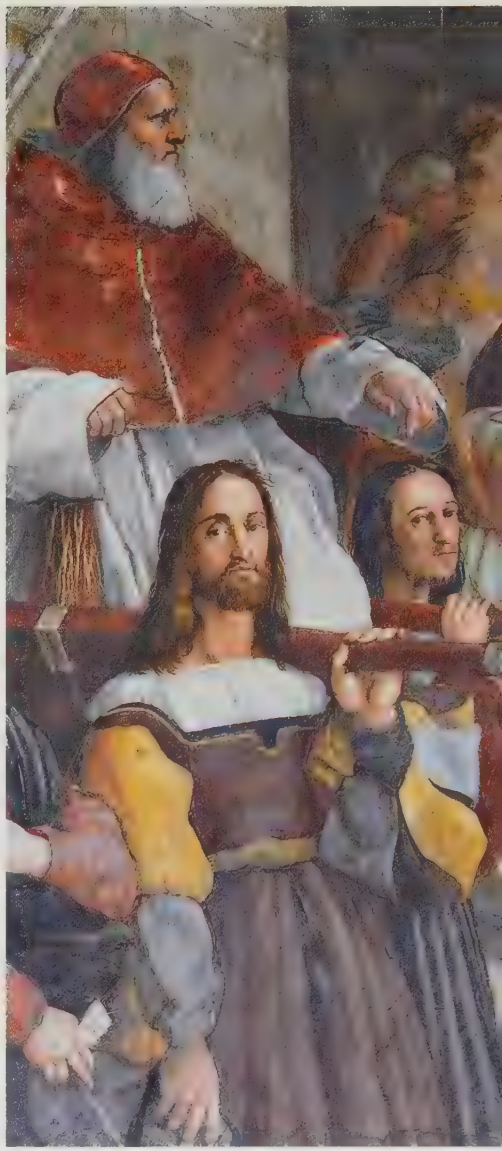
Julius II appears with a long beard, an unusual thing for the Renaissance popes. It represents an oath and a symbol. In 1510, seven years after his election, Julius II placed himself at the head of a Holy League against Louis XII of France and made a vow not to cut his beard off until the French were driven out of Italy. This happened in 1512, but the Pope had got used to his beard and didn't cut it off.

The final portrait of the great Renaissance pontiff can be seen in the celebrated tomb dedicated to him, and executed by Michelangelo, in the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli. The recent work carried out to clean and maintain the tomb has allowed new discoveries. The head of the supine pope above the famous statue of Moses is very probably also the work of Michelangelo. This theory derives in particular from the delicacy of the wonderful beard.

In the left corner of the fresco, just below the figures of the Pope's noble 'chair-bearers', we can read the final date of the painting: ANN D MDXIII, *Anno Domini 1514.*

The wording seems inaccurate, given that we are accustomed to write the number fourteen in Roman numerals as XIV, *and not* XIIII, *but it is not. The number* IIII, *in the Etruscan manner, appears in numerous inscriptions in the Roman forum and it also appears in Rome above the arches of the Colosseum to indicate the numbers of the entrance gates. The contracted form, '*IV*', was used only later.*

A fascinating curiosity: if you have a wrist watch or a clock at home with Roman numerals, you will marvel to see that IIII *is almost always written in the ancient manner – perhaps you have not noticed this before!*



The Mass of Bolsena
The Stanza di Eliodoro

The scene shows a miracle that occurred in 1263. A Bohemian priest on a journey to Rome made a stop at Bolsena, near Viterbo. As he was saying Mass in the small local church, he had a moment of doubt about the Transubstantiation, or the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At the same moment as he broke the sacred host, numerous drops of blood fell upon the corporal, the cloth on which the chalice and paten rest, staining it.

It was this miracle which gave rise to the feast of Corpus Christi, instituted by Pope Urban IV in 1264. The corporal stained with the blood of Christ is preserved in the magnificent duomo at Orvieto.

In this fresco Raphael has exploited masterfully the small amount of space at his disposal: a lunette with a large window cutting into it. He has set the scene inside a church, with the altar placed in the centre of a raised presbytery.

The left side of the painting illustrates the occurrence of the miracle: on the face of the bohemian priest and those present in the church we read amazement and great feeling; even the candle flames are 'agitated'. On the right side is Pope Urban IV, who Raphael depicts with the profile of Julius II, with his court beside him. They are not amazed or agitated; they have no doubts about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

If we look carefully at the lunette, we notice a flaw in the symmetry. The window has not been constructed at the centre of the arch. Raphael made this inexactitude almost disappear by lengthening the plane of the presbytery on the right side and adding a magnificent and extremely colourful group of 'chair-bearers' to fill out and balance the more extended surface.

Leo I Repulsing Attila
The Stanza d'Eliodoro

In 452 AD Attila, the king of the Huns known as 'the scourge of God', was preparing to sack Rome, after having devastated Aquileia and what are now the cities of Milan and Pavia. Accompanied only by a few dignitaries, Pope Leo I went to meet the barbarian king near Mantua and persuaded him to return to Pannonia and the Hungarian plain.

According to tradition, Attila withdrew because he saw in the sky Saints Peter and Paul, swords in hand, ready to defend Rome and the Pope.

Raphael was assisted in painting the right-hand section of the fresco by his pupils Giulio Romano and Giovan Francesco Penni. He set the scene at the gates of Rome; recognisable in the background are the Colosseum and an aqueduct; fires in the woods herald the arrival of the barbarians.

Almost certainly the episode illustrated in the fresco was chosen by Julius II to commemorate the battle of Ravenna, which, in spite of the defeat of the Holy League, forced the French to beat a hasty retreat from Italy.

The fresco was begun in 1513 and at this stage Raphael began painting, on the left, a grey mule that carried on its back a somewhat portly cardinal, Giovanni de' Medici, who had been present at the battle of Ravenna. In that same year, when Raphael was about to paint a white mule carrying Saint Leo the Great with the features of Julius II, Julius died and a new Pope was elected: Giovanni de' Medici, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, taking the papal name of Leo X.

Raphael then painted Giovanni de' Medici again, but this time on the white mule and wearing papal robes. Thus, in the fresco, Giovanni de' Medici appears twice, first as a cardinal, then as a pope.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THE STANZA DELLA SEGNATURA

This magnificent room was the study and private library of Julius II. Its name is connected to the fact that it subsequently became the site of the tribunal of 'Signatura Gratiae et Iustitiae', which dealt with legal proceedings and the conceding of acts of pardon.

The recent cleaning of these marvellous frescoes has restored them to their original splendour. Raphael was barely 25 years old when the Pope commissioned him to decorate this first room.

All of the frescoes on the walls and the vault are by Raphael. The monochromes on the lower part of the walls are by Perino del Vaga. They replaced the beautiful inlaid wood destroyed by Charles V's German mercenaries during the terrible sack of Rome in 1527.

The beautiful floor, dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is inlaid with polychrome marble 'recycled' from marbles imported by the ancient Romans: purple-red porphyry brought from Egypt, green serpentine brought from Greece, yellow from the Roman province of Numidia and white marble from Carrara in Italy.

In the centre of the floor is the crest of Nicholas V (1447–1455), with the crossed keys, the name of Julius II, the crests of the Medici Pope Leo X (added later) and numerous stars of David that underline the continuity between Judaism and Christianity.

The Disputation on the Holy Sacrament
The Stanza della Segnatura

This was the fresco with which Raphael began the decoration of this Stanze, and also the first fresco done by him in Rome.

It is known as *The Disputation on the Holy Sacrament* because of an inaccurate interpretation given in the sixteenth century and a description by Vasari. A more appropriate title might be *The Triumph of Religion*.

Raphael's composition is well-nigh perfect. From the top, descending in perfect alignment, are the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist, which is the point of contact between Heaven and Earth.

Depicted in the upper part of the painting is the 'Church Triumphant', the community of saints and blessed souls. The Everlasting Father is surrounded by the angels; Christ is with the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist; around them are the Elect.

On the left we recognise Saints Peter (with the keys given to him by Jesus), Adam, Saint John the Evangelist and King David. On the right we see Saint Stephen with his martyr's palm; Moses with the Tablets of the Law and rays of light emanating from his brow; Saint James the Less; the patriarch Abraham (for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, who all recognise him as their progenitor) and Saint Paul with the sword of martyrdom, in commemoration of his beheading, which took place in Rome around the year 67 AD.

The dove of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is depicted beneath the figure of Christ. It is flanked by four cherubs who hold up the four Gospels.

The lower part of the fresco depicts the 'Church Militant', made up of the faithful and those in religious orders, united around the Holy Host. Above the altar, the Sacred Host is the point of contact between Heaven and Earth.

Depicted on the extreme left, is the white-haired figure of the painter and Dominican friar Fra Angelico. Leaning on the balustrade is the great architect Donato Bramante, friend and protector of Raphael. It was he who suggested to Julius II that the young painter newly arrived in Rome should be entrusted with the works in this room.

One observation helps us to understand Raphael's great talent not only as a painter but as a future architect. The balustrade was painted to balance the one on the opposite side, on which another figure leans, and both of these are meant to hide the symmetrical flaw brought about by the door on the right side of the wall.

The handsome youth with the blue mantle beside the balustrade is almost certainly a portrait of Julius II's great-nephew, the eighteen-year-old Francesco Maria della Rovere, who in 1508 became the Duke of Urbino. The Pope sitting on the left of the altar with the high tiara is Saint Gregory the Great. Raphael has given him a resemblance to Julius II in the days before he grew his beard.

Beside him sits Saint Jerome, who is easy to recognise because of the lion crouched at his feet (behind the books).

The two figures on the right of the altar, wearing white mitres, are the Church Fathers Ambrose and Augustine, and next to them are Pope Innocent III, Saint Bonaventure in his Franciscan habit and Pope Sixtus IV in his imposing gold robes. Sixtus IV was a della Rovere and the uncle of Julius II; he was the Pope responsible for the construction of the famous Sistine chapel that took its name from him.

Just behind this pope we see the profile of the great poet Dante Alighieri with his head crowned with laurels.

The fine floor in perspective, the steps and the altar all convey the sense of a splendid basilica not yet completed. It should be borne in mind that Julius II himself had given orders to Bramante to demolish the old basilica built by the Emperor Constantine around the year 324 AD.

The work on the new basilica had begun in 1506. In this fresco Raphael represented an ideal completion of the Christian church with a magnificent 'architecture' of saints and human figures.

If we look closely, we can see on the right the beginnings of an imposing white wall, almost certainly one of the enormous piers of the new Basilica of Saint Peter.

The School of Athens

The Stanza della Segnatura

Of all the frescoes that decorate the walls of Raphael's Stanze, this is undoubtedly the most famous and the most widely reproduced.

In a large building with imposing coffered vaults, the great philosophers, mathematicians and artists of antiquity have come together. This spacious building, which is remarkably like the future Basilica of Saint Peter, was almost certainly suggested to the young Raphael by his friend the architect Donato Bramante, who had recently begun work on Saint Peter's construction.

In the centre we see the two most influential philosophers of ancient Greece: Plato and Aristotle.

On the left is Plato, the great Athenian philosopher of the fourth century BC, the pupil and friend of Socrates. With his right forefinger he is pointing to the sky to indicate the importance he gives to ideas and to the spirit.His face resembles that of the a great Renaissance artist and scientist. Indeed, Vasari reminds us that the young Raphael met Leonardo da Vinci in Florence in 1504, when Leonardo was 52 and preparing the cartoons for the fresco of the *Battle of Anghiari* in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Both emotionally and artistically, this encounter made a huge impression on the young artist, who was then only 21. Vasari writes that, after meeting Leonardo, Raphael abandoned the manner of Perugino, his master, and moved closer to that of Leonardo, particularly in the delicacy of his colours. This portrait is a significant homage by the artist to his new idol.

On the right is Aristotle, Plato's pupil. With his open hand he indicates the Earth, to point to the importance he attributed to tangible matter as the source of scientific, physical and political knowledge.

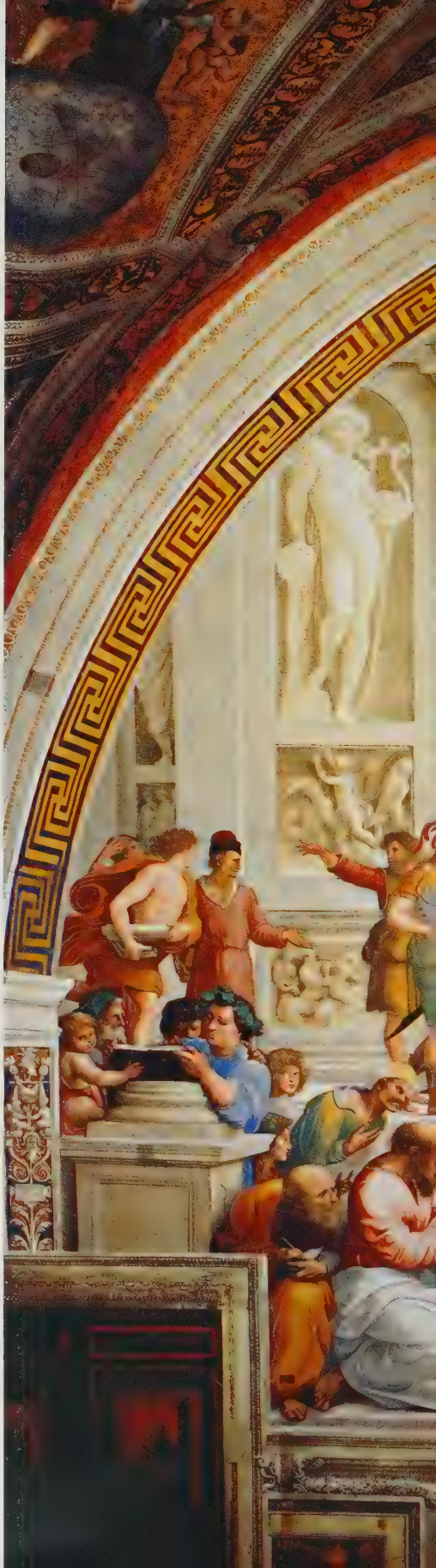
On their left, in profile and wearing a dark green tunic, we recognise the great philosopher Socrates; enumerating them on his fingers, he states his logical deductions to some followers who listen spellbound.

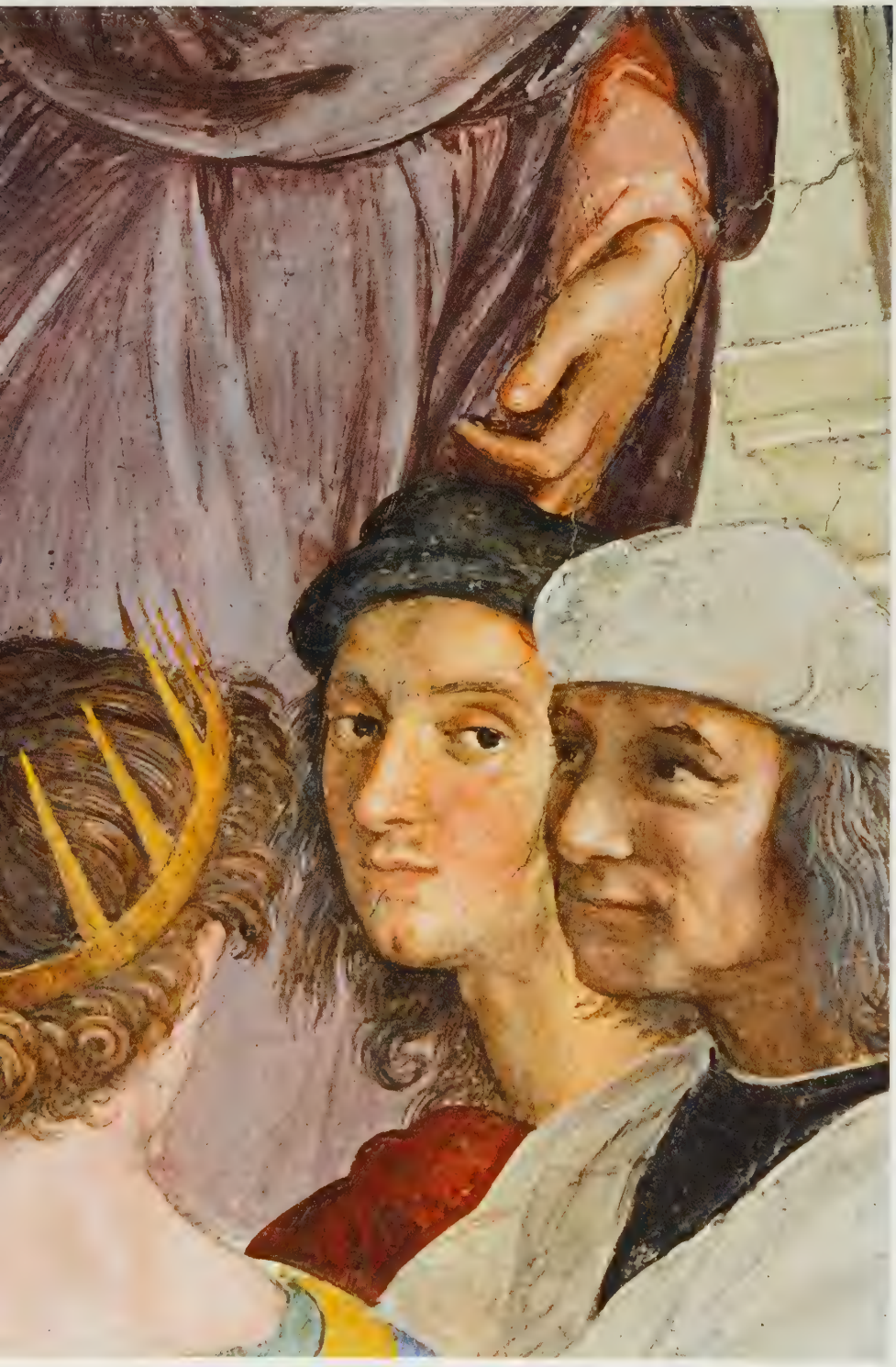
The handsome blond youth, depicted below the followers of Socrates, could be another portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, the eighteen-year-old great-nephew of Julius II.

Below him, absorbed in writing, is the famous mathematician Pythagoras of Samos. Note the strange figure of the man beside him, who is attempting to copy what Pythagoras is writing.

Sprawling on the steps of the temple, engrossed in reading some notes, is the philosopher Diogenes. His philosophy is known for its contempt for social conventions, convinced as he was that the sage must be able to do without all comfort, reducing his needs to a minimum and renouncing what is superfluous to them. His careless posture provokes the reproof of the young man on his right.

In the right-hand corner of the fresco, intent on demonstrating the measurements of a geometric figure with a compass, is the great mathematician Euclid. As a sign of respect and affection, Raphael has drawn the face of one of the greatest mathematicians of antiquity as a portrait of Bramante, his friend and compatriot (he was born near Urbino). His baldness makes him easily recognisable.





Detail showing Raphael's self-portrait

Among 'intellectuals' such as philosophers and mathematicians, Raphael wanted for the first time to also depict artists, in order to demonstrate that art is not a form of manual labour but an intellectual pursuit. Among the artists in this painting Raphael included himself; he appears second on the right, wearing a black cap and looking out at us with a sweet and soulful gaze. Vasari describes him as young and of a pleasant appearance, cheerful and generous; this self-portrait confirms his description.

Seeing the handsome face of Raphael, it is normal to wish to know more about the causes of his death at the young age of 37.

Out of fondness for the great artist and respect for the truth I prefer to use the words of his contemporary Vasari, who described the reasons for Raphael's death:

> *Raphael was a very amorous person, delighting much in women, and ever ready to serve them... whence it happened that, having on one occasion indulged in more than his usual excess, he returned to his house in a violent fever. The physicians, therefore believing that he had overheated himself, and receiving from him no confession of the excess of which he had been guilty, imprudently bled him, insomuch that he was weakened and felt himself sinking; for he was in need rather or restoratives.*

These words make Raphael, at once so impetuous and reserved, seem all the more touching. What a loss to art and humanity.

Detail showing the portrait of Michelangelo

Raphael had a great desire to see what the 33-year-old Michelangelo was painting in the Sistine Chapel. It is significant that the two artists had begun their frescoes in the Stanze and the Sistine Chapel in the same year.

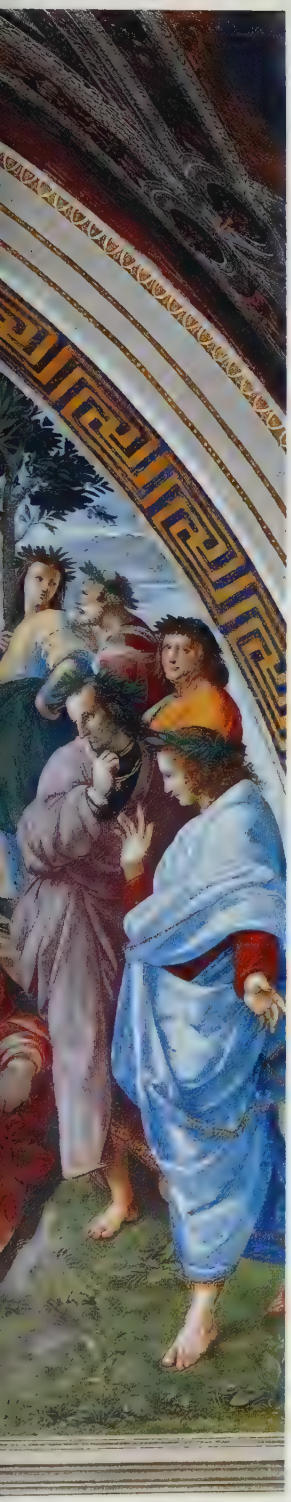
Michelangelo was painting the vast ceiling entirely by himself and allowed no one except the Pope to see his work.

On 14 August 1511, impatient to see the whole of what Michelangelo had painted so far, the Pope gave orders for the scaffolding in the Sistine Chapel to be taken down.

It was on this occasion that Raphael, accompanied by his friend Bramante, was able to see the chapel for the first time. The sight of Michelangelo's powerful figures was a real shock to him. Vasari records that Raphael altered his style after seeing Michelangelo's frescoes. The proof of this alteration has forever remained in *The School of Athens*. Raphael removed part of the fresco, applied a new layer of plaster and, at the foot of the steps, painted the reflective figure of Michelangelo in his typical 'muscular' style (note the vigorous knees).

By good fortune, the preparatory cartoon that Raphael drew for the fresco of the The School of Athens *was saved and is preserved in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan. The figure of Michelangelo does not appear in the cartoon, which proves that this portrait was added later.*

I regard this figure as one of the most important testimonies in the history of art: it shows us how much Michelangelo must have influenced the art of Raphael, and it displays the admiration of the young man from Urbino for the great Florentine.



Parnassus

The Stanza della Segnatura

The mountain sacred to Apollo rises up in an idyllic landscape. At the centre of the composition is the young god surrounded by the nine Muses, who play not the traditional lyre (which was played by plucking the strings), but a more modern instrument used until the very end of the seventeenth century. This was the *lira da braccio*, which was played against the shoulder with a bow and resembled the viola.

If Raphael had painted Parnassus today, as a modern touch, he would probably have put an electric guitar into the hands of Apollo! The artist intended to bring the scene almost up-to-date by making it resemble a modern gathering of artists.

Their heads are crowned with laurels in remembrance of Daphne, who, in mythology, was turned into this tree. The laurel wreaths seem almost to have been freshly made from the foliage of the bay trees that enliven this spot.

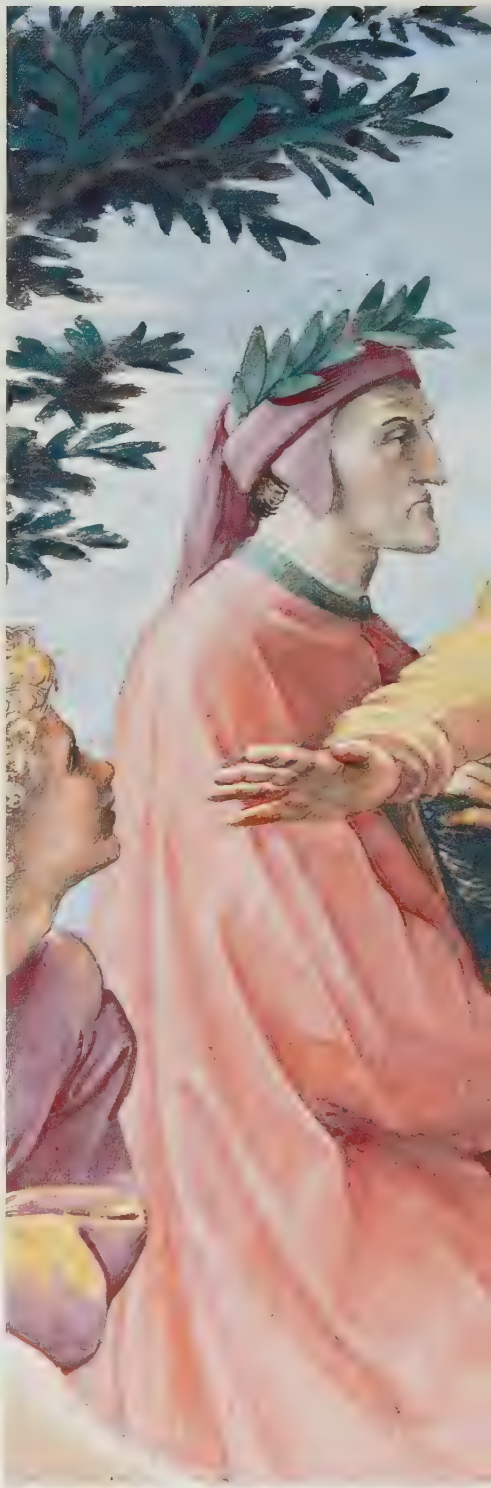
On the left, it is easy to recognise Homer, who is blind, and behind him Dante Alighieri and the poet Virgil, who is pointing to the god. The poets on the right are not clearly identifiable.

It is delightful to see that, in this case too, the large window that opens out through the wall does not pose a problem for Raphael, but is rather a spur to resolving the matter of composition. He uses the upper part of the window as a support for Mount Parnassus and has two figures leaning on its frame: Sappho and a male poet, Horace possibly. They cover up part of the frame and almost come out of the scene, invading the space in front of them, in an extraordinary prefiguration of the Baroque.

Detail showing Dante Alighieri

The great Florentine poet has a very beautiful profile that would not look out of place on an ancient medallion. Observing how much attention Dante pays to Virgil's pointing, we are reminded of the *Divine Comedy*. In the first two canticles, the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, Dante followed Virgil as his guide and as the symbol of reason during his wanderings.

Here, the sublime poet, who suffered so much despair during his exile far from Florence, seems to have found the peace he yearned for.



THE STANZA DEL INCENDIO DI BORGO

This was the private dining room of the popes where they received family and friends. Here Leo X, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, invited Leonardo da Vinci on a number of occasions to spend time in pleasant conversation. It should be noted that the great scientist was the Pope's guest in the Belvedere Palace and then at the Vatican between 1513 and 1516, as recorded on a marble slab which is little noticed but still visible at the entrance to the small room of the Apoxyomenos.

The frescoes in the room were done almost entirely by Raphael's pupils. After the death of Bramante, in 1514, Raphael was appointed by Leo X as architect of Saint Peter's. He made cartoons and suggestions for this room's frescoes but was not always present, as is evident.

Fire in the Borgo

The room takes its name from this fresco, which depicts a fire that really did break out in the ninth century, during the pontificate of Leo IV, in the Borgo district, opposite the Basilica of Saint Peter.

The work was almost entirely executed by Raphael's pupils, in particular by Giulio Romano and Giovan Francesco Penni. It is important more for its historical than for its artistic significance, because in the background can be seen one of the rare depictions of the old façade of the first basilica, built in the fourth century AD by the Emperor Constantine. Note the mosaics that once decorated the façade of the basilica.

On the left of the painting, the fire in a district of Rome evokes the burning of Troy. The group of figures immediately brings to mind the legend of Aeneas, in which the young Trojan hero, on the warnings and entreaties of his mother Venus, leaves Troy with his aged father Anchises on his back and his son Ascanius by his side. This is in turn a reference to the Eternal City, which according to tradition was founded by the descendants of Aeneas, the twins Romulus and Remus.

Here too is the touching figure of a woman who makes sure of her baby's safety, without regard for her own life; and sliding down the wall, there is the figure of the frightened young man, which is particularly striking in anatomical terms.

Detail showing the Loggia delle Benedizioni

Leo X wanted to commemorate a miracle worked by a Pope who bore the same name as himself, Leo IV (847–855). According to the *Liber pontificalis*, the Pope looked out from his loggia and saw the terror and despair of the inhabitants of the Borgo district, which he had founded and fortified, as they tried by every means to fight the flames. Asking for divine assistance, with an ample gesture of benediction, according to tradition, he succeeded in overcoming the fire. Beneath the loggia, the inscription 'LEO - PP - IIII' is a dedication to the Pope who worked this miracle.


NEPHAS

The Vault
Perugino (*c.* 1450–1523)
The Stanza dell'Incendio di Borgo

The frescoes on the vault were painted by Pietro Vannucci, known as Perugino. The writer Vasari tells us that, as a sign of respect and affection for his master, Raphael prevented the original work from being replaced by a new fresco.

In the centre we see the crossed keys of Pope Nicholas V, pre-dating this fresco. Starting from the tondo on the right-hand side of the image shown, and continuing anti-clockwise, we can see: God the Creator surrounded by the angels; Christ in glory within an aureole of golden light; and The Holy Trinity. In this left-hand tondo we can see: the Father surrounded by angels; the Son with the Apostles in the centre; and below the dove of the Holy Spirit. In the last tondo, at the bottom of the image shown, is Jesus between two angels, and alongside them are a saint with a halo and a venerable old man with a long beard and two small dark horns protruding from his head.

Who is this last figure? Art historians are divided. Some think this is the devil, disguised as an old man, tempting Jesus. I do not share this view. His posture is too serene and is hardly compatible with a demonic figure; moreover, in such a case it would be possible to see the animal hoofs of the devil poke out, poorly concealed, from beneath his long robes. Above all, the presence of the devil is unthinkable in a context where all the figures are 'heavenly'.

The fine figure of the old man certainly represents the lawgiver Moses. The Bible (Exodus 34: 30) tells us that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after having heard the words of God, 'the skin of his face shone'. The Hebrew word 'KARAN', used in the original text, can mean both 'resplendent with rays' or 'with horns'. In more than one depiction of Moses he is shown with horns, precisely because of this error of translation.

THE BORGIA ROOMS

These rooms were the private residence of Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia, of Spanish origin, who was elected Pope in 1492. He lived here until 1503. The rooms were splendidly frescoed by the Perugian painter Bernardino di Betto, known as Pinturicchio, and by his pupils between 1492 and 1494.

Pinturicchio had already worked in the Vatican, collaborating with his master Pietro Perugino on the frescoes on the walls of the Sistine Chapel. He is known above all for his marked decorative sense and his delightful narrative qualities. The Borgia Rooms currently house an interesting collection of modern religious art, which was inaugurated with enthusiasm by Pope Paul VI.

THE ROOM OF THE SAINTS

This room takes its name from the *Stories of the Saints* frescoed by Pinturicchio in the lunettes of the vault. It was the last room frescoed by Pinturicchio and his pupils.

The Disputation of Saint Catherine of Alexandria
Pinturicchio (*c.* 1454–1513)

This is undoubtedly Pinturicchio's finest work in the Borgia Rooms. The scene it depicts takes place in a vast landscape where delicate trees stand out against the warm light of the sky. In the centre is an imposing Roman arch, on top of which we see a great bull, the symbol of the Borgia family. Golden highlights create warm reflections on the trees and fields. Exotic figures in sumptuous costumes animate the scene.

The blonde girl in the blue gown and red cloak represents the young virgin, Catherine, who was born in Alexandria in Egypt. She is listing on her fingers the theses in defence of the Christian religion. This Saint, beheaded in 307 AD, is shown in the presence of the emperor Maxentius, with the Arch of Constantine in the background. Traditionally, the Saint's delicate face, framed with blonde hair, has mistakenly been seen as a portrait of the beautiful and unfortunate Lucrezia Borgia, the natural daughter of Alexander VI.

On the left side of the fresco, above the two little boys, the Florentine architect Antonio da Sangallo is depicted holding a set-square. On his left is an interesting self-portrait by Pinturicchio, with long dark hair.


PACIS
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ROOM OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE FAITH

This takes its name from the *Mysteries of the Christian Faith* represented in the lunettes.

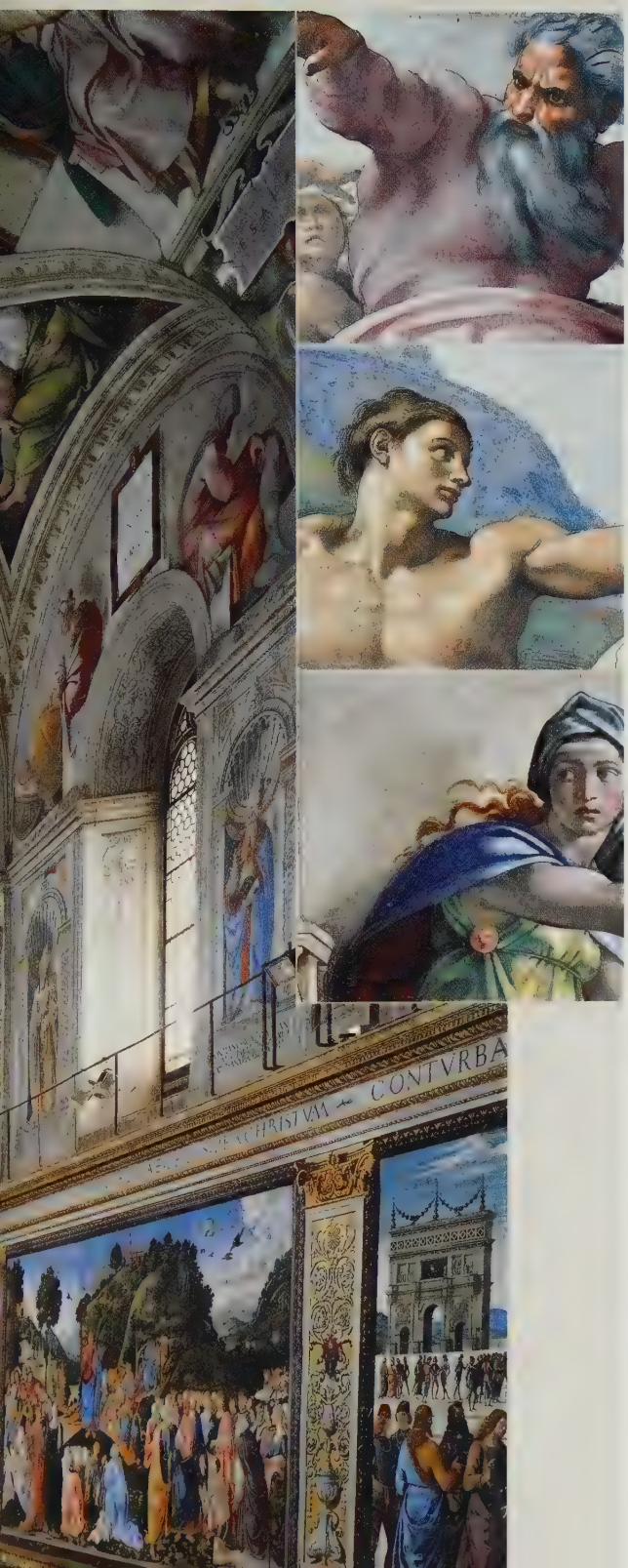
The Resurrection
Pinturicchio (*c.* 1454–1513)

This fresco by Pinturicchio, perhaps done in collaboration with his pupil Bartolomeo di Giovanni, is opulently decorative, with gilding overlaid not only on the glittering aureole of light that surrounds the risen Christ but also the landscape and the figures.

Here the kneeling figure of Alexander VI, in papal robes with the tiara beside him, is striking for its solidity.

When we see this image we can understand Julius II's wish to move to the apartment on the floor above, because, as his master of ceremonies, Paris de Grassis, wrote, 'he did not wish to see all the time the image of Alexander, his predecessor'.

The Sistine Chapel



The chapel takes its name from Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere), who decided to have it built in 1477. It has the same proportions as the Temple of Solomon constructed in Jerusalem in the tenth century BC, being 40.23 metres long, 20.70 metres high and 13.41 metres wide, almost the same as those recorded in the Bible in the Book of Kings ($60 \times 30 \times 20$ cubits). Sixtus IV had wished to repeat the dimensions of the Temple of Solomon in order to demonstrate that there is no opposition between the Jewish and Christian religions and that the one is the continuation of the other.

The Pope called the greatest artists of the day to Rome, asking them to fresco the central strip of the walls of the chapel with stories from the *Life of Moses* and stories from the *Life of Jesus*: yet another instance of continuity between the Old Testament and the New.

On 15 August 1483, with the walls marvellously frescoed and the vault simply painted with an azure sky studded with golden stars, the chapel was inaugurated with great solemnity and was dedicated to the Virgin of the Assumption.

In 1508 Pope Julius II (Giuliano della Rovere), the nephew of Sixtus IV, compelled Michelangelo to fresco the vault of the chapel. The artist was forced to accept the task, although he regarded it as a violation of his calling as a sculptor. He spent four years alone on the scaffolding, under constant pressure from the Pope; but, when his work was uncovered, the young and extremely fine sculptor emerged as the greatest painter of all time.

In 1536, another pope, Paul III (Alessandro Farnese), asked the now famous Michelangelo to fresco the back wall of the chapel with the *Last Judgement*, an astonishing work that he completed within five years.

The Sistine Chapel is unanimously acknowledged as the greatest masterpiece in the history of fine art. 'Until you have seen the Sistine Chapel, you can have no adequate conception of what man is capable of accomplishing', wrote the great German writer Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

The floor is of polychrome inlaid marble and was made, as in the Stanza della Segnatura, by reusing coloured marbles imported by the ancient Romans.

The marble transenna, formerly used to separate the area reserved for officiating clergy from that meant for the faithful, is decorated with elegant reliefs which are the work of Mino da Fiesole.

The Sistine Chapel is where the election of the pontiff takes place. When the cardinals come from all over the world and assemble there, the doors to the chapel are locked — *cum clave* — and the outcome of their voting is announced to the world with either black or white smoke.

SOUTH (LEFT) WALL: THE LIFE OF MOSES 1481–1483

Beginning at the side of the wall closest to the *Last Judgement*, we see:

The Journey of Moses into Egypt
Perugino (*c.* 1450–1523)

This fresco is the work of Perugino. The ample space of the composition and the perfect arrangement of the figures in the landscape are typical of Perugino.

The depiction of the journey of Moses into Egypt is placed in an almost magical setting, with the lovely trees that stand out clearly against the sky.

At the centre of the scene, tiny figures depict Moses taking leave of his father-in-law, Jethro, a priest of the land of Madian. Moses had just received Yahweh's command to liberate his people and lead them into Canaan, the Promised Land, and he is about to set out on his return to Egypt with his family.

In the centre, in the foreground, an angel sent by the Lord stops Moses and rebukes him for not having circumcised his second son Eleazar. In his hand Moses has the rod of the command that he has been given by Yahweh, behind him are his wife Zipporah and his sons Eleazar and Gershom, and on the right the delicate scene of the circumcision of Eleazar by Zipporah.

Centuries of smoke and dust had made the fresco almost invisible. The dark square beneath the figure of Zipporah was left by the restorers to demonstrate the 'colour' of the fresco before it was cleaned.

The cleaning of all the frescoes on the sides of the Sistine Chapel was made possible by a handsome contribution from the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums, co-ordinated in Rome by the Reverend Father Allen Duston, O.P. With their generosity, the American friends have bestowed a great gift on humanity, restoring to the frescoes their lost luminosity and brilliance, but above all saving them from the irremediable damage caused by soot.

Immediately after the cleaning of the frescoes, the Messaggero, one of Rome's most important daily newspapers, wrote: 'These great frescoes are of such beauty that, were each one of them in a different city, it would be worth travelling to see them all'. The foresight of Sixtus IV, combined with the astounding artistic accomplishments of the Italian Renaissance and the generosity of private patrons, however, allows us to admire them all in the same place.

The Life of Moses
Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510)

The episodes illustrated in this fresco took place in the life of Moses before those described in the previous painting. On the right Moses is killing an Egyptian who had mistreated an Israelite, while the latter is being helped by a woman. Above, on the right, Moses leaves Egypt to make his way to Palestine. The centre of the scene shows Moses helping the daughters of the priest Jethro to give water to their flocks, after having chased away the shepherds with a stick. In the centre, among the trees, he takes off his sandals to kneel down. On the left, in front of the burning bush, he is listening to the word of God, who reveals his ineffable name: Yahweh, the God of his fathers, who orders him to liberate the Hebrew people from Egyptian oppression. In the bottom left-hand corner, Moses, followed by his wife Zipporah, his sons, relatives and servants, and carrying the rod of the command given to him by Yahweh, is returning to Egypt.

The Florentine painter Botticelli worked on this fresco with his pupils, as was customary during the Renaissance, but it is very easy to identify among the numerous figures those executed by the master. The hand of the great artist is recognisable in the lovely figures of the daughters of Jethro. Their blonde flowing locks and the soft draperies of their clothing immediately bring to mind the two masterpieces in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence: *Spring* and the *Birth of Venus*. Undoubtedly the figures on the left, who are following Moses, are also by the master.

The influence of the refined humanistic climate fostered by the Medici in Florence is apparent in this fresco. It undoubtedly inspired both the perfection of the human form and the platonic transformation of reality into beauty, which are found in Botticelli's painting.

The Crossing of the Red Sea
Biagio di Antonio (1446–1516)

Although in this fresco he shows himself to be precise and attentive to detail, as well as being a good portraitist, the Florentine artist does not bear comparison with the other artists who were frescoing the walls of the Sistine Chapel. While engaged in this work, Biagio di Antonio, a painter of ample and assured compositions, was influenced by Ghirlandaio, the Florentine master who was painting *The Calling of the Peter and Andrew* directly in front of him.

It is marvellous to imagine what a vast construction site for art and what a melting pot for ideas the Sistine Chapel must have been between 1481 and 1483. The finest painters of the day (with the single exception of the great Leonardo da Vinci, who was in Milan during these years) had been summoned to Rome, along with their pupils, by Sixtus IV. Each one of them observed the techniques and characteristics of the other masters, with resulting reciprocal influences.

There was another event that stimulated both the work at the Sistine Chapel and the Renaissance. During these years, after centuries of neglect, Nero's residence, the Domus Aurea, was rediscovered. All the artists present in Rome rushed to see the amazing frescoes by the imperial painter Fabullus, and they were much impressed by his colours and his figures (see page 55).

In the upper right, tiny figures show the Pharaoh on his throne as he considers his course of action on the Jews in flight, but, together with his soldiers, he will be swept away by the waters of the Red Sea beneath a stormy sky.

Depicted on the opposite bank, Moses and his people have now reached safety. The lawgiver is holding the rod with which he has just commanded the sea to come together again. A woman is singing a hymn of thanks to the Lord.

To the right of Moses, the figure with the long white beard is Cardinal Bessarion, the great humanist who in the fifteenth century established an important scholarly circle in Rome (his famous 'Casina' on the Appian Way still retains its charm).

Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law
Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507)

In the upper part, Moses on Mount Sinai receives the Tablets of the Law from Yahweh. Below are the Israelites, waiting impatiently, who have turned to idolatory and are worshipping the Golden Calf. In the centre, the enraged Moses destroys the Tablets and hurls them to the ground. The upper-right portion depicts the bloody punishment of those guilty of idolatry. On the left, Moses comes down again from Mount Sinai bearing a new copy of the Law. Rays of light emanate from his face and his head.


NEMO SIBI ASSVMIT
VOCATVS ADEO
TANQVAM AARON

The Punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram
Botticelli (1445–1510)

On the right side of the fresco are men rebelling against the authority of Moses and trying to stone him. In the centre, holding the rod, Moses invokes Jehovah's aid against the rebels. A powerful force, as if issuing from the thurible of the priest Aaron, dashes to the ground the thuribles of the rebels Korah, Dathan, Abiram and one of their followers. On the left the ground opens up to swallow the rebels.

The scene is given a classical setting by the insertion of two monuments from ancient Rome. In the centre is the famous Arch of Constantine; and on the right there is an interesting depiction of the Septizonium, the monumental nymphaeum with several floors of columns which Septimius Severus had built in the second century AD. At the end of the fifteenth century this still stood at the foot of the Palatine Hill, beside the Circus Maximus. Sadly, a century later it was destroyed on the order of Sixtus V, who used its marbles to decorate his new chapel in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore.

The Death of Moses
Luca Signorelli (*c.* 1445–1523) and Bartolomeo della Gatta (1448–1502)

On the right Moses can be seen reading his Testament to the twelve tribes of Israel. At his feet is the Ark of the Covenant, with the Tablets of the Law and the gold receptacle containing some of the manna gathered in the desert. The heroically naked youth in the centre perhaps represents the tribe of Levi to which the priesthood is entrusted. This image brings to mind the beautiful statue of *Laocoön*, who was a priest of Troy and was also depicted as a nude.

In the upper centre, on Mount Nebo, an angel shows the old lawgiver the rich Promised Land which he will never reach. Moses comes down from the mountain and, on the left, hands the staff of command to Joshua.

On the top left, in a fairy-tale landscape, Moses dies at the age of 120.

The third figure from the left, with dark hair and dressed in blue, looking towards the viewer, is a self-portrait of Luca Signorelli.

When new, the frescoes of the Life of Moses ended on the entrance wall of the Sistine Chapel, opposite the Last Judgement, with *Saint Michael Defending the Body of Moses*, by Signorelli. Unfortunately, the far wall collapsed in the sixteenth century and a new mediocre fresco was painted by Matteo da Lecce.

NORTH (RIGHT) WALL: THE LIFE OF JESUS 1481–1483

Beginning at the side of the wall closest to the *Last Judgement*, we see:

The Baptism of Christ
Perugino (*c.* 1445/1450–1523) and Pinturicchio (*c.*1454–1513)

Depicted in the centre is the baptism of Christ on the banks of the Jordan. In the top-left corner John the Baptist is preaching, while on the opposite side Jesus is also shown preaching. In the centre, at the top, God the Father blesses the scene, with the dove below him, over the head of Jesus, thereby beautifully representing the Holy Trinity.

Note on the top of the frame, in the centre and just above the figure of God the Father, Perugino's signature: 'OPUS - PETRI - PERUSINI - CASTRO - PLEBIS' ('The work of Pietro Perugino of Città della Pieve'). This is the only existing signature in the whole of the Sistine Chapel, reflecting the fact that Perugino was responsible for coordinating the group of painters frescoing the chapel.

The Temptation in the Wilderness
Botticelli (1445–1510)

In the top-left corner, disguised as a monk, the devil is tempting Jesus.

At the top, in the centre, the evil one transports Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and tempts him a second time.

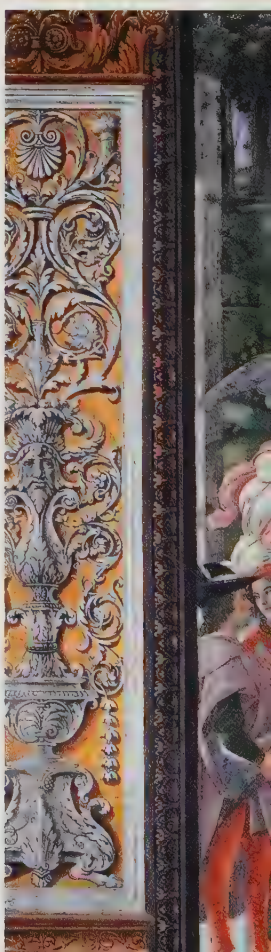
In the upper right-hand corner, the devil finally takes Jesus to a mountain top, but, defeated for the third time, he casts off his monk's habit and flees.

In the centre is the beautiful scene of Clensing of the Leper.

In place of the facade of the temple, we see the frontage of a building actually existing in Rome. This is the new Ospedale dì Santo Spirito, inaugurated by Sixtus IV in 1478, shortly before the completion of the Sistine Chapel. The Pope proudly asked Botticelli to display what was undoubtedly one of the most properly functioning hospitals in the world. This centuries-old hospital is still treating patients, and it has kept its original Liber Regulae, *the oldest known hospital rule book. Today, the facade that appears in the fresco is visible at the corner where Via della Conciliazione meets the Tiber.*

The two oaks painted on the right of the hospital recall the della Rovere family lineage of Pope Sixtus IV: 'of the Oak'.

Botticelli worked with his pupils as was the custom at the time, but in this fresco too it is of interest to identify the figures painted by the master himself. The woman on the right in gauzy blue and white attire, the young man in the centre dressed in white and the two angels higher up on the left can be identified by their gracefulness as being unmistakably the work of Botticelli.



The Calling of Peter and Andrew
Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494)

The scene takes place on the Sea of Galilee, surrounded by grand mountains and elegant palaces. In the middle distance, Jesus is choosing his first apostles, the brothers Peter and Andrew, who, partly hidden by other figures, are fishing; in the centre foreground Jesus gives them his solemn blessing. In the middle distance, on the right, Jesus is choosing two other apostles, the brothers James and John, who are in the boat together with their father Zebedee. The highly detailed faces of the numerous figures who are present at the 'calling' of the first apostles are portraits of important Florentine nobles then living in Rome.

It is noteworthy that Domenico Bigordi, known as Ghirlandaio, had an extremely busy workshop in the Florence of the Medicis, which he ran with his two younger brothers. And it was to Ghirlandaio that the thirteen-year-old Michelangelo was apprenticed in April 1488.

The Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Lepers
Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507)

In the centre is the *Sermon on the Mount*, in which Jesus delivers the beatitudes. Depicted on the right is the *Healing of the Lepers*.

The figure with the black hat, on the left and staring out at us, is almost certainly a self-portrait of Cosimo Rosselli.

In particular, one should observe the splendid background scenes, which have a medieval atmosphere.

The Delivery of the Keys to Saint Peter
Perugino (*c.* 1445/1450–1523)

This is one of the finest and most famous frescoes painted on the side walls of the Sistine Chapel. It is the work of Pietro Vannucci, known as Perugino, Raphael's teacher.

In the centre, Jesus hands the Keys to Saint Peter uttering the well known words: 'you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 16: 18, 19).

One key is made of gold and the other of silver, symbolising the spiritual and temporal powers of the popes.

Beside the magnificent Renaissance church built on a centralised plan, the Arch of Constantine is twice depicted; it is easily recognisable from the statues of barbarians against the columns: a double homage to the emperor who gave freedom to the Christians and temporal power to the popes.

When we look at this work and think of Raphael's fresco of the *School of Athens*, we immediately recognise the depth of Perugino's influence on him. It was from Perugino that Raphael learned a sense of balance in the composition of the scene, the perfect placing of figures in the landscape, the delicacy of the faces, the softness of the draperies and the vividness of the colours.

On the right, holding a set square, is Giovannino de' Dolci, the Florentine architect who built the Sistine Chapel. With his right forefinger, he indicates the compass held in the hand of the other Florentine architect, Baccio Pontelli, who designed the Sistine Chapel.

IESV · CHRISTI · LEGISLATORIS


REPLICATIO LEGIS·EVANGE

The Last Supper
Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507)

Jesus is seated at the table of the last supper; he is about to institute the sacrament of the Eucharist by blessing and distributing bread and wine.

Opposite him, isolated on the other side of the table, is Judas, on the point of leaving the company to prepare for the capture of Jesus. The apostles all have haloes. Judas also has one, but unlike all the others, which are golden, his is grey. Judas has a small devil on his back.

Through the wide windows, three episodes from the Passion are shown: the Agony in the Garden, the Betrayal and the Crucifixion.

Note the shape of the room, with three wide windows on the back wall opening onto a vast panorama. The beams on the ceiling tell us that these are three sides of a concave wall. On the two side walls are the doors. The structure of the ceiling again allows us to make a logical deduction: that there are three more walls on our side. We are therefore inside an octagonal room. In fact, we are in the octagonal room of Nero's Domus Aurea, which on its recent rediscovery had been promptly visited by all of the artists working on the Sistine Chapel site.

I am firmly of the opinion that this is the first and the most interesting depiction (unobserved until now) of the imperial palace, which, with its wonderful paintings by the great Roman artist Fabullus, so much influenced the Italian Renaissance.

Notice how the pillars decorated with grotesques and with elegant Corinthian capitals almost stand outside this room in the imperial palace, to become the pillars that separate all the great painted panels on the walls of the Sistine Chapel.

After this fresco came Ghirlandaio's *Resurrection of Christ*, on the entrance wall. This fresco too was destroyed when the wall collapsed in the sixteenth century. The space was repainted badly by Hendrick van den Broeck, who was known in Italy as Arrigo Paludano.

THE CEILING

It was in 1508, the same year in which Raphael had begun the frescoes in his Stanze, that Michelangelo had the scaffolding erected to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. At that time all that could be seen on the ceiling was a great azure sky with golden stars.

Vasari tells us that Julius II had called, or rather ordered the 33-year-old Michelangelo to fresco the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the suggestion of the architect Bramante, a friend of Raphael. I do not think that this suggestion was put forward out of generosity. I am convinced that Bramante, who at that time was working on the construction of the new Basilica of Saint Peter, preferred the young Michelangelo to be kept busy frescoing the vast ceiling of the Chapel, out of his way. For Michelangelo, the fresco was a completely new technique. As we know, it was a very demanding task, since it allows no corrections to be made (see page 12).

Michelangelo was forced to desert his beloved sculpture, but ultimately he was stimulated by the enormous challenge. The Florentine artist planned a 'painted architectural structure', intended both to separate the individual scenes while preserving their unity, and to endow the ceiling with monumentality. Across the ceiling he set great figures of the prophets from the Old Testament and alternated them with the Sibyls, the pagan prophetesses, who according to Christian tradition predicted the motherhood of the Virgin Mary. In the small triangular spandrels and the lunettes above the windows he painted the long sequence of Christ's ancestors, beginning with Jesse, the father of King David (eleventh century BC).

The four great pendentives on the corners of the ceiling depict episodes from the Miraculous Salvation of Israel. The two directly above the *Last Judgement* depict the episodes of the Punishment of Haman and the Brazen Serpent. The two pendentives on the opposite side of the ceiling depict the stories of *David and Goliath* and *Judith and Holofernes*.

Across the centre of the ceiling are twenty splendid naked figures, the *Ignudi*, the pictorial completion of the *Belvedere Torso*. Some of these nude figures hold up long sacks of green cloth containing acorns, a very clear allusion to the oak tree that forms part of the coat of arms of the della Rovere Popes Sixtus IV and Julius II. Between the *Ignudi* are set monochrome tondi, showing scenes from the Old Testament.

On the ceiling's highest point Michelangelo frescoed the nine extremely famous scenes from the *Creation*.

To understand how Michelangelo managed to turn himself from a sculptor into a painter, we should bear in mind that he did not paint the ceiling following the chronological order of the Creation described in the Bible. It was no simple thing to begin with the ethereal flying figure of the Divine Creator, and Michelangelo chose to start with human scenes.

Vasari tells us that the first scene he painted was the Flood. He followed this with the Drunkenness of Noah and then the rest of the scenes.

Another reason why Michelangelo started 'at the end' was that he wanted to avoid beginning the painting, and therefore dripping paint, above the altar where the Pope celebrated mass on important occasions.

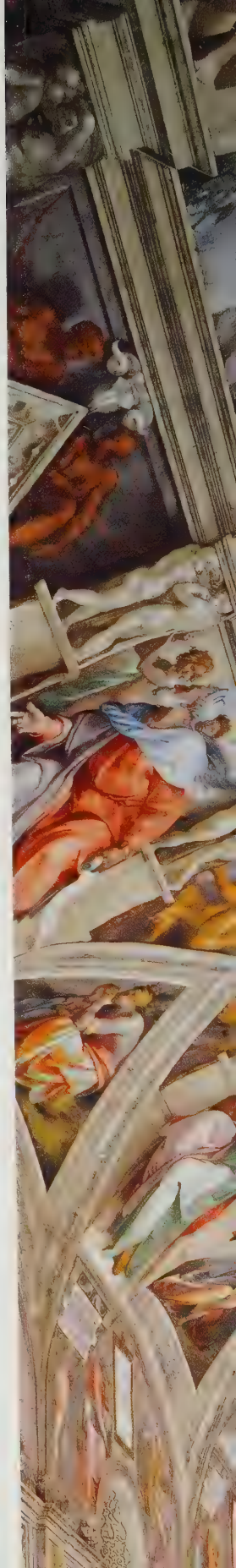
Vasari also remarks that, as soon as he had finished the fresco of the Flood, Michelangelo immediately realised that the figures were too small and that, seen from below, they would not be sufficiently distinguishable. Having realised this, he enlarged and increasingly separated the figures in the Creation, *including the Ignudi, the sibyls and the prophets.*

The restoration, or rather the cleaning, of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was carried out between 1980 and 1989 thanks to sponsorship from the Nippon Television Network of Tokyo, which in exchange obtained the copyright of all the images of the Chapel during and after this work.

It took nine years of dedicated work, carried out with professionalism and love by the team of master restorers of the Restoration Workshop of the Vatican Museums, coordinated by Fabrizio Mancinelli and Gianluigi Colalucci.

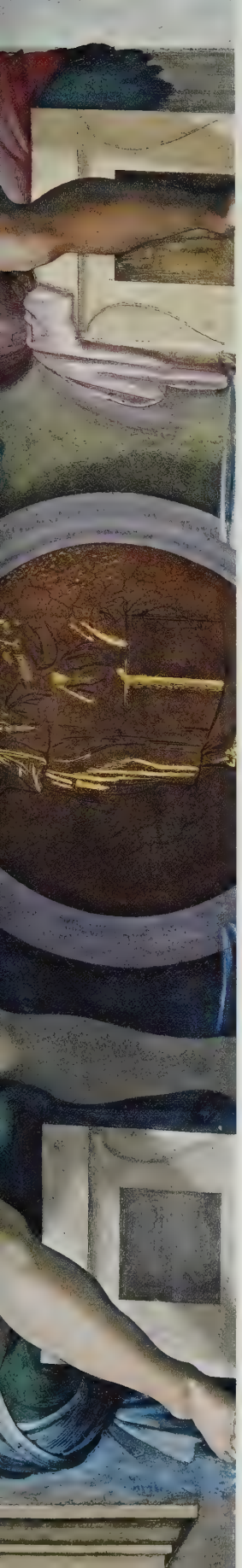
The mobile scaffolding used by the team of technical workers ran on castors and was almost identical to the one devised by Michelangelo five centuries earlier.

The cleaning of the *Last Judgement* was carried out by the same expert group of specialists between 1989 and 1994.



ESAIAS
IOEL
ERITHRAEA

DANIEL
EZECHIEL



The Separation of Light from Darkness

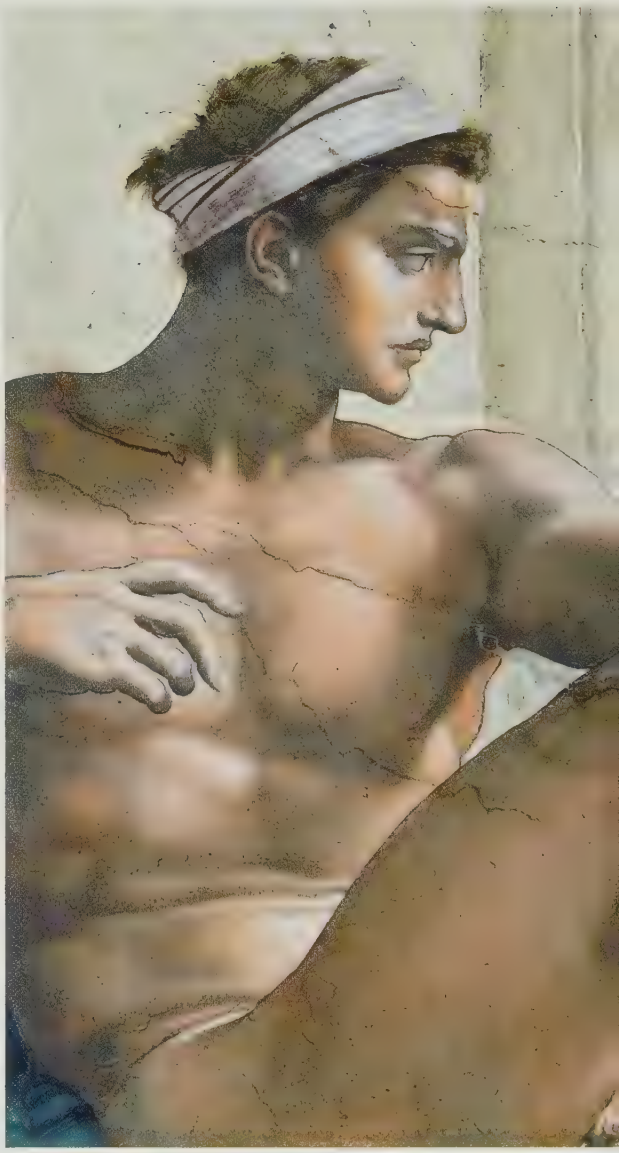
God the Creator completely fills the scene. With broad sweeps of his arms He creates light and separates it from the darkness.

In the book of Genesis the Bible tells us the words of the Creation: 'Fiat Lux', or 'Let there be Light: and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness' (Genesis 1: 3, 4).

We should note that the first panel representing the Creation was in fact the last one that Michelangelo painted. Also, once the ceiling was cleaned, it was confirmed that the entire scene had been painted in a single day, or *giornata* (the time it took to paint one section of fresco), with the fresh plaster spread on and the fresco then painted in around four hours, without additions or revisions.

The figure of God is almost evanescent. Michelangelo has given it a corporeal substance that is just enough for us to understand the action being performed. The Creator emerges from primordial chaos, he is the line of separation between darkness and light. He is almost an 'unfinished' work in paint, anticipating what Michelangelo was to draw out of the more substantial medium of marble in the last years of his life.

The last four *Ignudi*, painted here, are wonderful for their vigorous muscularity and anatomical perfection. After four years spent painting, Michelangelo the sculptor had retained his powerful sense of the three-dimensional, undiminished.



The Creation of the Sun and the Moon

The mighty figure of God creates the Sun with his right hand and the Moon with his left. The recent cleaning has uncovered two appealing details that were previously indistinct because of the layer of grime that made the image extremely dark. The Moon is cold, and an angel which can be seen under the left arm of God the Creator is covering its head with its cloak to warm itself. The light of the sun is dazzling and another angel is shielding its eyes with its arm. Only now is it possible to observe the shadow over the angel's eyes.

These delightful details give us a fascinating insight into how the great Michelangelo, having almost reached the end of his immense task, was now more relaxed, engaged in his work on the ceiling with greater serenity, almost joyfully.

God is extremely busy, he has seven days to create the universe. On the left-hand side of the scene, the Almighty is shown from behind in an audacious display of perspectival foreshortening, as he is engaged in creating the plants.

The Separation of Land and Sea

Flying over the oceans, God separated the land from the waters.

In the foreground we see a wonderful monumental view of the Almighty's hands in the work of creation.

The Creation of Adam

'So God created man in his own image' (Genesis 1: 27).

This is without doubt the most famous image in the entire history of art. We only need to see the two hands reproduced, or just the tips of the fingers, and we immediately recognise Michelangelo's masterpiece.

On the left is the anatomically perfect Adam. His hand is still weak, his eyes trustfully look upon God the Father.

On the right, the Almighty contemplates his creature with love; his hand expresses power; he is infusing Adam with life and soul.

The figure of the Eternal Father is a striking one. The word 'eternal' is an adjective. How can an adjective be rendered in painting? Michelangelo's solution was to depict an old face, furrowed by experience, with, at the same time, a young and powerful body.

God is surrounded by the angels; in their midst is the figure of a young woman. Who is she? Theologians and art historians have come up with various suggestions. The ones that seem most convincing to me are the Virgin Mary (the mother of Jesus was already present in the mind of God) or Eve (the Almighty was already picturing a companion to make Adam happy).

God the Creator and his angelic court are enveloped in a scarlet mantle. Is this symbolic of something? Historians have wondered about this for centuries. The answer came from the United States, the land of common sense. In 1990, the American neurologist Dr Frank Lynn Meshberger, observed that the outline of the mantle exactly matches the shape of the human brain in cross-section. Indeed, experts in anatomy have been able to identify, in God's left arm, the medulla oblongata *(where the brainstem begins) and the* pons Varolii *(higher up); in the dark leg that drops vertically below the mantle, they can recognise the* hypophysis, *or pituitary gland (the endocrine gland at the base of the brain). Dr Meshberger asserted that Michelangelo's intention was to demonstrate, indirectly, that he had been able to observe the human brain. This is true. In Rome it was forbidden to dissect corpses, but in Florence Michelangelo had obtained permission from the director of the mortuary at the Ospedale dì Santo Spirito to carry out dissections primarily in order to observe the position of muscles and nerves.*

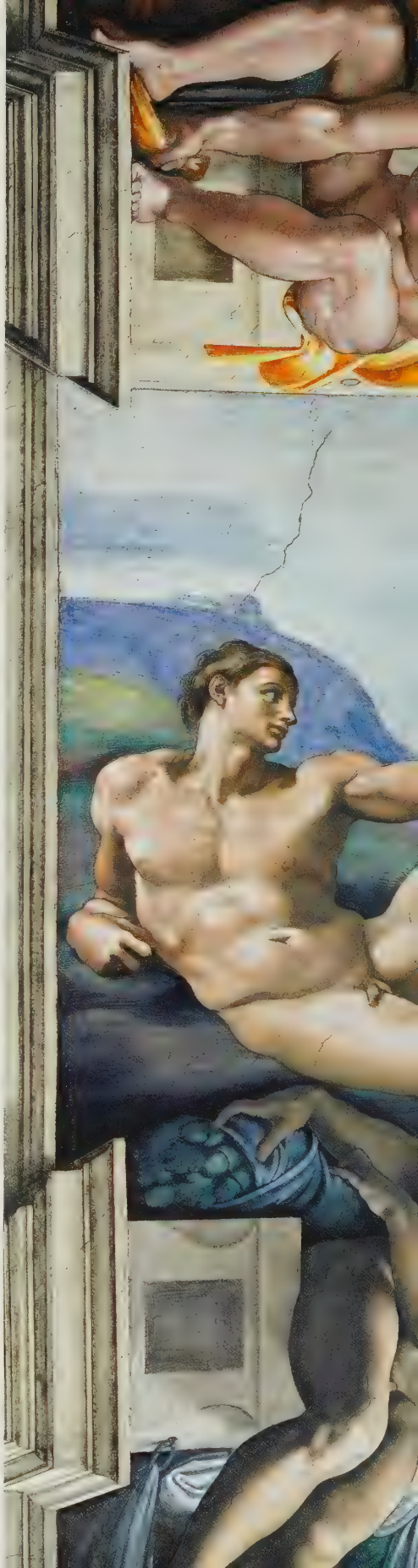
This hypothesis about the representation of the human brain is fascinating, but ... (there is always a 'but' that can attach new ideas to long-standing theories) recently an American gynaecologist, observing the profile of the red mantle, noted an outstanding resemblance to the human uterus. The green cord trailing below the mantle corresponds exactly with an umbilical cord that has just been cut.

This is an interesting hypothesis that presents the Creation scene as an idealised representation of the physical birth of man. It explains the navel that appears on Adam, which is at first perplexing because he was created, not born of a woman.

This new hypothesis recalls the words of Pope John Paul I, delivered during a public audience on 20 January 1999: 'God is the Father and the Mother'.

The hypothesis about the outlined brain and uterus can not be wholly affirmed, but neither can they be rejected as categorically incorrect.

Undoubtedly there are still countless hidden messages waiting to be uncovered among the hundreds of images on the vast ceiling.



The Creation of Eve

Genesis tells us that God saw that Adam was sad. You can not be happy alone, even in a place as wonderful as Eden. To see a stupendous sunset, for instance, and not be able to share its touching beauty with anyone is terribly sad.

> *So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.* (Genesis 2: 21, 22).

As we see, Eve, as if drawn out by the creative hand of God, shows her gratitude to the Lord, thanking him with joined hands.

The Temptation and Expulsion

Adam and Eve are idyllically sitting beneath the tree of knowledge. Deceived by the serpent, Eve accepts the forbidden fruit while Adam, contrary to what Genesis tells us, rises by himself and takes the fruit directly from the tree and not from Eve.

The angel who the Lord has posted to oversee the garden reacts at once. He points his sword against Adam's neck and casts both of them out of this earthly paradise. Eve cowers in terror behind Adam. Their faces and bodies are disfigured by their sin; they are alone and despairing in the desert, having disobeyed the only order they had received from the Creator by eating the forbidden fruit.

What was the forbidden fruit? The question is as old as the hills. The ancient rabbinical sources cite the fig as the tree of knowledge, and in the Middle Ages it was pictured as an apple tree. We can see clearly that Michelangelo painted a fig tree, making an exact reference to Genesis: 'the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons' (Genesis 3: 7).

When you look at their tempter, the serpent, you see that it has the head and the body of a woman. This is how the devil was often represented in the Middle Ages.

The figures of Adam and Eve in their earthly paradise may well be the most beautiful nudes ever painted by Michelangelo.

A great number of amazingly beautiful details emerged after cleaning. These are best appreciated with the use of binoculars.

I was lucky enough to be invited a number of times on to the scaffolding during the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel frescoes. Imagine being just a foot away from the huge figures on the ceiling. Everything seems enormous and altered by perspective. It is like being immersed in those biblical events.

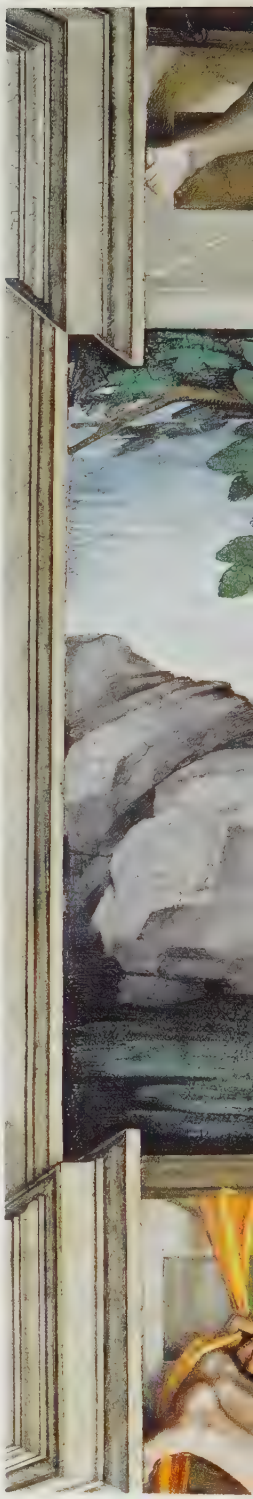
The first time I went up on the scaffolding, the Vatican's expert restorers were cleaning the lovely face of Eve, which is about 16 inches long and from close up it looks really big. It had a dark, almost black coating. Five centuries of soot and dust, as well as polishing with animal fat and subsequent retouching to highlight the outlines of the figures, had completely obliterated the contrasts and chromatic refinements; above all, the wonderful detail had been lost.

The restorer brushed on a fine layer of solvent, water and ammonia, and after a few seconds, just enough time to soften the dirt, began to remove it with a natural sponge soaked in distilled water; he did this with expert delicacy and above all with a great deal of love and respect for the fresco. The dirt came away with extraordinary ease, thanks to the smoothness that was the result of Michelangelo's perfect fresco technique. To the touch, the fresco had the texture of a ceramic glaze: an astonishing sensation.

It was easy to make out the retouching done on the dry fresco so as to join up the sequence of separate frescoed sections. The restorer always avoided thorough cleaning of the retouching on the dry fresco and deliberately left a very fine residue of 'dirt', so as not to run the risk of removing even an infinitesimal part of the original colour. Moreover, we can be absolutely sure that not even a gram of new colour was added. This is why, in all the interviews I have given to American and Italian television and radio, I have always been forceful in saying: 'Please, do not talk about the restoration of the Sistine Chapel; call it CLEANING!'. There is not a shadow of a doubt that all the wild controversies that arose during and after the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel were ill-founded.

There were two things that made a huge impression on me the first time I went up on the scaffolding. When the eyes of Eve emerged in all their splendour, for the first time in five centuries we could observe that Michelangelo had (deliberately?) touched the still-wet paint and had left his fingerprints upon it.

The cleaning of Eve's lips was even more breathtaking. Just a foot away from Eve's face, we could see that Michelangelo had used a tiny brush to bring out all the small vertical lines on the lips. I remember that we gazed at one another in wonderment. To any normal visitor looking up, this detail is invisible. This makes it clear that Michelangelo was not just painting for the Pope, but primarily for himself. For him this was the right way to paint the lips of Eve.



The Sacrifice of Noah

The book of Genesis says that, after the Flood, Noah left the Ark with his wife, sons and daughters-in-law, and, having built an altar, offered up a sacrifice in thanks to the Lord.

Michelangelo should have painted this scene after he finished the *Flood*, but he chose to leave the more important scene for the wider space (without all four *Ignudi*) that followed.

On the right we see one of Noah's sons; he has just killed a ram in sacrifice to Jehovah.

The figure of the woman whose head is crowned with laurels, the man on her left and the head of the second ram were entirely repainted by Domenico Carnevali, after a part of the fresco fell off in the late sixteenth century; it was only after cleaning that this mediocre restoration became obvious.

This panel with Noah's Sacrifice is particularly interesting, because on the left we see a group of animals, very few of which were painted by Michelangelo.

The Flood

This was the first panel painted by the then 33-year-old Michelangelo, between December 1508 and January 1509.

Despairing humanity tries to save itself in futile attempts to reach the mountain peaks. Let us remember the words of Genesis: 'And the rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights... And all flesh died that moved upon the earth... Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark' (Genesis 7: 12, 21, 23).

The Ark is shown at the top. If we look closely we can see the old patriarch Noah leaning out of a window on the right-hand wall with his arm raised up; perhaps he has just released the dove, or is waiting for its return. Indeed, the dove is clearly visible, settled inside a small window on the roof of the Ark.

All the figures in this fresco seem too small. This was a miscalculation on the part of Michelangelo, who at the time was still inexperienced in the technique of fresco. Fortunately he realised in time, and from then on, as Vasari tells us, he began enlarging and separating all the figures frescoed on the ceiling.

The Ark is composed of vertical walls covered with a roof, which is a strange form for a boat. The Holy Bible says that the Ark was rectangular and had a roof, but it is certainly not described as being so geometrically squared. Probably Michelangelo's intention was to communicate a message. The Ark has the appearance of a church or a temple. I am convinced that Michelangelo's message was that only contact with God would save humanity.

On the right of the scene, above the tent, is a large expanse where the paint is missing. One night in 1797 a number of barrels containing gunpowder for the bronze cannons placed at the top of Castel Sant'Angelo exploded. The terrible conflagration damaged all the roofs around the castle, among them the roof and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Fortunately, only the figure of an *Ignudo* and part of a tree from this panel were lost.

This explosion could easily have destroyed what the United Nations has deemed 'the greatest artistic masterpiece of all time'.

The Drunkenness of Noah

Genesis tells us that Noah was the first man to plant a vine and make wine from its grapes. Tasting it for the first time, not knowing its effects, he fell down drunk.

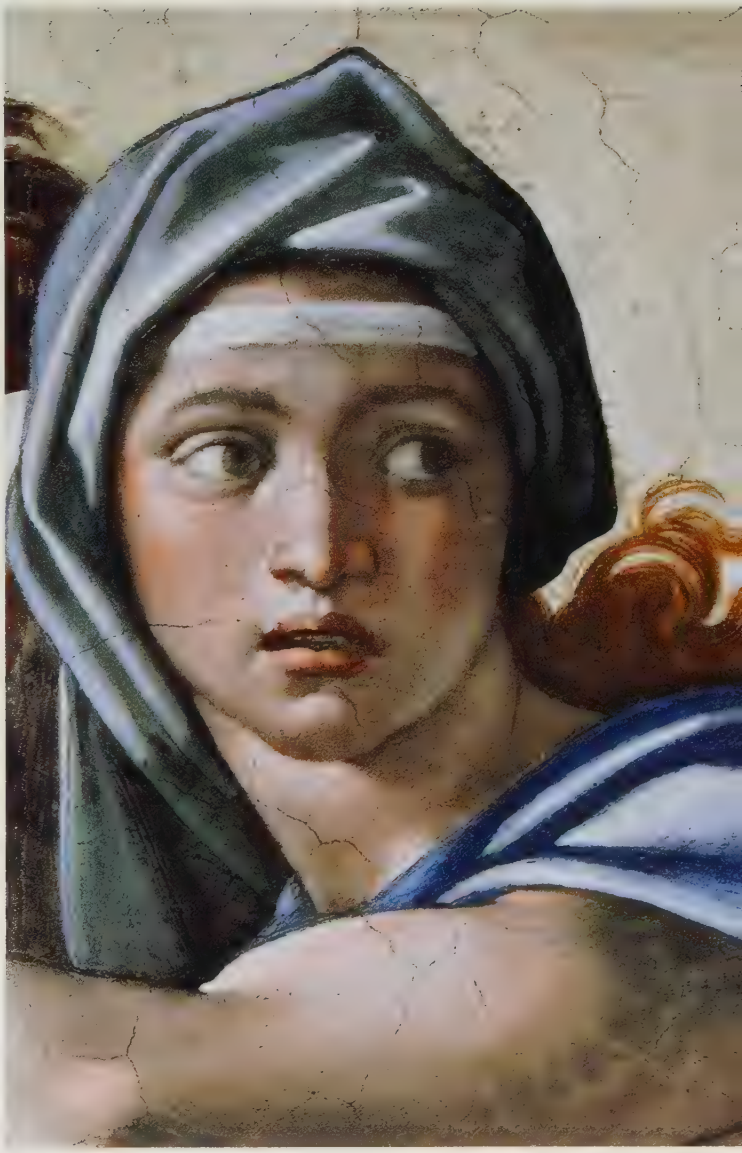
The scene shows us the old patriarch on the ground, drunk and naked. Around him are his three sons. Ham, seen from the back, points derisively at his father; Shem, on the right, restrains and rebukes his brother; Japheth covers his father with a garment, while turning his eyes away from him. When Noah wakes up, he will curse Ham and bless his other two sons.

Let us remember that, according to the Holy Bible, all the peoples of mankind descend from the three sons of Noah who survived the Flood. From Shem, the firstborn, descended the Semites, the first inhabitants of the northern part of the Arabian peninsula, which is to say the Assyrians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Arabs, Phoenicians, Jews and Ethiopians. From Ham, the second-born, came the Hamites, the inhabitants of Africa and western Asia, including the ancient Egyptians, Somalis and Berbers. From Japheth, the third-born, descended the Japhethites (Indo-Europeans).


DELPHICA

The Delphic Sibyl

The sibyls were pagan prophetesses who were regarded as inspired by Apollo, the God of prediction. According to Christian tradition, at the time of the Emperor Augustus they prophesied: '... a Virgin will conceive a child... he will become the King of the Universe!' Because they foretold the coming of Christ, Michelangelo placed them on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel among the Jewish prophets. The Delphic Sibyl was the first of these figures to be painted on the ceiling by Michelangelo. She has unrolled a parchment, and her wonderful eyes are lost in the distance. Undoubtedly, because of the beauty of her face, this Sibyl is the one most widely reproduced. The recent cleaning has renewed the splendour of the original colours.



The Libyan Sibyl

The Libyan Sibyl was the last to be painted by Michelangelo, in 1512. She is setting down a great book and is about to descend from her bench.

If we compare her to the Delphic Sibyl we can note the progress made by the artist over four years. From the sculptor there has now sprung a perfect painter.

The Libyan Sibyl is larger in scale than the Delphic Sibyl. The way her upper body turns and the movement of her legs are stupendous. Her dress has surprising nuances of colour, from yellow to orange to pink; but what is particularly wonderful is the transparency of the flimsy cloth veiling her legs, through which they can be seen.

How did Michelangelo achieve this effect? One explanation offered is that it is only a matter of painting the legs first and then veiling them. No. With the technique of the fresco it is essential to paint the legs and veil together, while the plaster is still wet. So what is the secret? The answer is that we don't know. Michelangelo was alone while he was painting. What is more, he was not an ordinary man, he was a 'genius'.

The Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah, the first of the four major prophets in the Bible, lived in the eighth centuries BC. He prophesied the future kingdom that would belong to those who followed the commandments of Jehovah. At the head of this kingdom there would be the Messiah King, a descendant of David; for the Jews this is Emmanuel, for the Christians it is Jesus.

The Prophet Isaiah is absorbed in listening to the words of a young angel. One of the fingers of his right hand serves as a 'marker' in his great book.

The Prophet Jonah

The Bible tells us, in the book of Jonah, that the Prophet was swallowed by a great fish (visible next to the figure of Jonah), but after three days he escaped unharmed.

For early Christians the story of Jonah became the prefiguration of the Resurrection: Jesus too spent three days in the tomb and then rose again.

The Prophet Jonah was the last figure painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and it is certainly the most monumental.

When the Florentine artist finished the ceiling, in 1512, he could not imagine that 24 years later another pope, Paul III, would ask him to fresco the wall of the Sistine Chapel above the altar. For me, the figure of Jonah is Michelangelo's artistic testament, his 'signature' on completion of the vast work of frescoing the ceiling.

Michelangelo has enlarged all the figures, there is almost no room left on the throne and Jonah is forced to bend backwards. But what an astonishing perspective! The triangle between the two lateral pendentives, on which Jonah is painted, juts forward and Jonah bends backwards. Only Michelangelo could have come up with such a provocative idea.

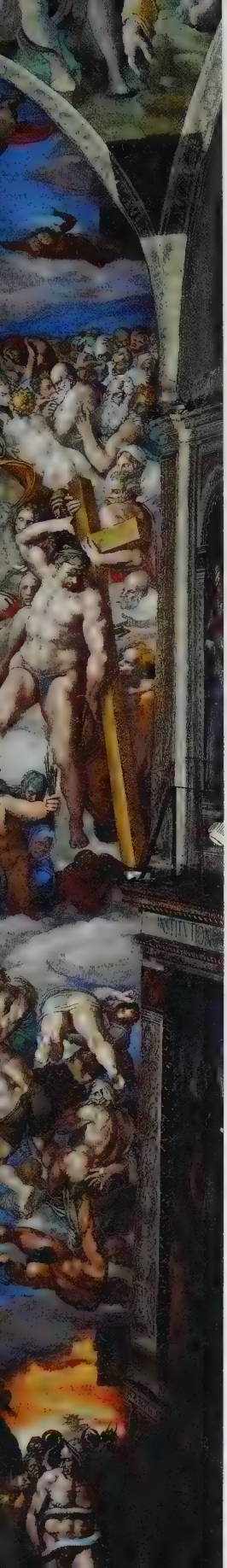
Jonah bends backwards, almost in rapt admiration and judgement of the vast painted ceiling. This is a surface of more than 500 square metres, frescoed in barely four years by one man alone.

On 1 November 1512, on the solemn occasion of All Saints Day, Pope Julius II inaugurated the splendid ceiling by celebrating solemn vespers in the Sistine Chapel.

With great humility and simplicity, the 37-year-old Michelangelo wrote to his father in Florence: 'My paintings in the chapel are finished and the Pope is extremely satisfied'.


IONAS


IONAS



THE LAST JUDGEMENT 1536–41

After being engaged for a long time in Florence as an architect in the service of the Medici pope, Leo X, to build the new sacristy of San Lorenzo, known as the Medici Chapel, and the Biblioteca Laurenziana, Michelangelo was again invited by the pontiff to take up his brush — this time it was the Farnese, Paul III. It was 1536.

By now Michelangelo was 61; his experience and painterly abilities were immense.

He no longer needed to divide the great wall of the Sistine Chapel into sections, as he had done with the ceiling: now he had a perfect mastery of space. He painted no architectural elements to frame the terrible scene of the *Last Judgement*. It is imagined hovering in the void. For the viewer it is as if the wall had suddenly dissolved, opening up the sight of the last day. The faithful feel directly drawn into the final judgement.

This is an immense vortex of divine, human and diabolical bodies. The angels are depicted without wings and in a state of classical nudity, symbolising purity; they have no need of clothing, they are 'pure spirits'.

The vortex of bodies originates from the centre in the bottom half, where a group of trumpeting angels announces the end of the world with the trumpets of judgement.

The last judgement also means the Resurrection of the dead. We see skeletons regaining their flesh, the dead emerging from their tombs. All of them are raised up on high and the bodies are physically joined again to their souls, whether blessed or damned; the living will be judged in that same instant by Christ the Supreme Judge and will be able to stay on high if they are blessed, or cast down if they are damned. In the lunettes at the top the angels fly up with the symbols of the Passion of Christ: the cross, the crown of thorns and the pillar to which the Romans tied Christ at his flagellation.

Just below, in the centre, is the monumental figure of Jesus, who, with one sweep of his arm, welcomes the blessed and banishes the damned. Beside Christ, in the same aureole of light, is the Virgin Mary. On their left, we see Saint Andrew holding up the X-shaped cross on which he was crucified. The powerful figure immediately on the left, with an animal hide as a cloak, is Saint John the Baptist; directly opposite him is Saint Peter displaying the keys given to him by Christ when he was appointed head of the Church.

Observe the keys: one is gold/yellow, and the other silver/white. They symbolise the two powers conferred on Peter, and therefore on the popes, by Jesus. The golden key represents spiritual power, over souls; the silver one stands for temporal power, over the earth. The symbolic colours of the keys are also viewed in relation to the flag of the Vatican State, which is also yellow and white.

Lower down, on the left, bathed in a magnificent shade of blue obtained from crystals of precious lapis lazuli, are the souls that will reach Paradise. Some of these, the purest ones, manage by themselves; the others are helped by angels.

The image of the man whose head is veiled, reaching a cloud on which three souls await him and stretch out their hands, is entrancing.

To the left of the trumpeting angels there is an angel who is using a long rosary to help two souls rise up. This is a very clear reference to the usefulness of saying the rosary.

Just below them a soul is being fought over by two angels and a devil, who is attempting to pull the soul down.

To the right of the trumpeting angels is the figure of the so-called 'despairing one'. He is suffering terribly because a devil is biting his leg, but even more so because devils are dragging him down, for eternity. The scene below reminds us both of classical mythology and of the great Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Charon has just crossed the Styx with his boat and, swirling his long oar, he pushes the damned towards Hades, with its entrance overseen by Minos.

Centuries of smoke and dust had covered the wall of the *Last Judgement*. It is impossible to imagine how blackened it had become before the cleaning. To give some idea of this, the restorers left small rectangles of the surface untouched, as 'witnesses'.

If you look at the lower left corner you will see a resurrected body coming out of its tomb. The shroud it wears is white, but one section, left uncleaned, looks like a little black window. Other 'witnesses' can be observed higher up, near the left-hand corner of the wall, in the centre and in the upper right-hand corner.

Detail showing Christ with Saint Laurence and Saint Bartholomew

The focal point of this spectacular composition is the monumental figure of Christ in Judgement. Around him swirl numerous figures, more than 400 of them. Only the Madonna is outside the vortex. She is seated beside her Son, almost fearfully. In this terrible final moment she can no longer intercede for humanity and she turns her sweet gaze towards the souls that are reaching heaven. The delicate spiralling movement in the figure of the Virgin was to influence all the artists of the Mannerist period, particularly Giambologna and his delicate Venuses with their deliciously 'swivelling' forms.

At Christ's feet are the Saints who protect Rome. On the left is Saint Laurence, the young deacon who was burned alive for demonstrating his Christian faith. He holds up the grill on which he was tortured to death. He too seems fearful of Christ's powerful gesture.

According to Christian tradition, his remains lie in Rome in the catacombs under the Basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura.

There is an interesting historical connection with the grill of Saint Laurence. The King of Spain, Philip II, won a decisive victory over the French at the Battle of Saint Quentin on the feast day of Saint Laurence (10 August) 1557. In honour of the Saint he decided he would construct a great building inspired by the instrument of his martyrdom. This was an enormous rectangle in grey blue granite measuring 162 × 208 metres. Four high towers on the corners would form the feet of the grill while a long structure protruding halfway down one side formed the handle. This is the famous Escorial, close to Madrid.

According to tradition, half of the original grill is preserved in the monastery in Spain, while the other half can be seen in Rome in the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina, safeguarded in an eighteenth-century urn under the altar of the first chapel on the right.

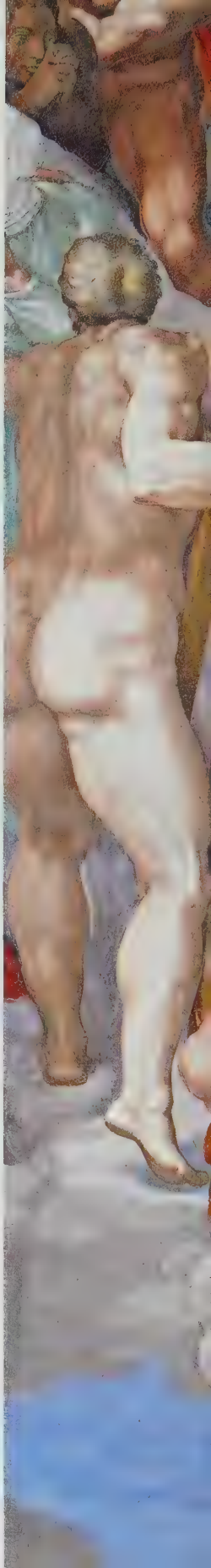
The other monumental figure at the feet of Christ in Judgement is Saint Bartholomew. His muscular torso and powerful legs are undoubtedly a homage to the statue of the *Belvedere Torso*, which Michelangelo so much admired. The great artist has virtually made a mirror-image of it, inverting the twisting of the body; Saint Bartholomew turns his torso to the right to look at Christ. He was one of the twelve apostles and was martyred in an atrocious manner, by being flayed alive. According to Christian tradition, his remains lie in Rome in the church of San Bartolomeo on the island in the Tiber.

The Saint shows the Lord the knife with which he was flayed, and in his left hand he holds up the hair-raising spectacle of his own skin.

If you look carefully at the face depicted on the skin you will see with horror that it is Michelangelo's self-portrait.

Why did the great artist wish to leave posterity his likeness in this ghastly way? I think that for him it was a strong statement of faith. When Michelangelo painted Saint Bartholomew he was around 64 years old. In those days life expectancy was shorter than it is today, and Michelangelo probably imagined that he was approaching the end of his days. He could not foresee that the good Lord would allow him a full 25 more years.

One can be almost convinced that Michelangelo wanted to leave this powerful message: 'I am ready to die for the love of Christ; if a new Christian martyr is needed, here I am'.



Detail showing the Trumpeting Angels

With blasts on their trumpets, the angels of the Last Judgement, depicted without wings and in a state of classical nudity, announce the end of time and the resurrection of the flesh. They display the lists of the elect and the damned, but note the difference between the two volumes. The list of the elect is held by only one angel. Two angels are necessary to hold up the weighty list of the damned.

Detail showing Minos (Biagio da Cesena)

Minos, depicted in the lower right corner of the *Last Judgement*, was the mythical king and lawgiver of the island of Crete. Because of his celebrated sense of justice, mythology placed him in Hades as judge of the dead. In his *Divine Comedy* Dante Alighieri also set him at the entrance to Hell, describing him as a devil with a long tail. With this he would circle his body the number of times corresponding to the infernal circle to which a soul would be sent.

Michelangelo respects the tradition, but he adds some curious variants like the two long ass's ears. Why is this? Fortunately, in his book Lives of the Artists, *Vasari reveals the answer to what might have remained a small mystery in the history of art.*

The face of Minos is a portrait of Monsignor Biagio Martinelli da Cesena, Paul III's master of ceremonials. Biagio criticised Michelangelo for the nudity of the figures, which in his view made the painting immoral, rather than magnifying the work of the Creator. Tired of these constant criticisms, when he was finishing the fresco Michelangelo gave Minos the profile of Biagio da Cesena, adding, undoubtedly with the Pope's permission, two offensively long ass's ears.

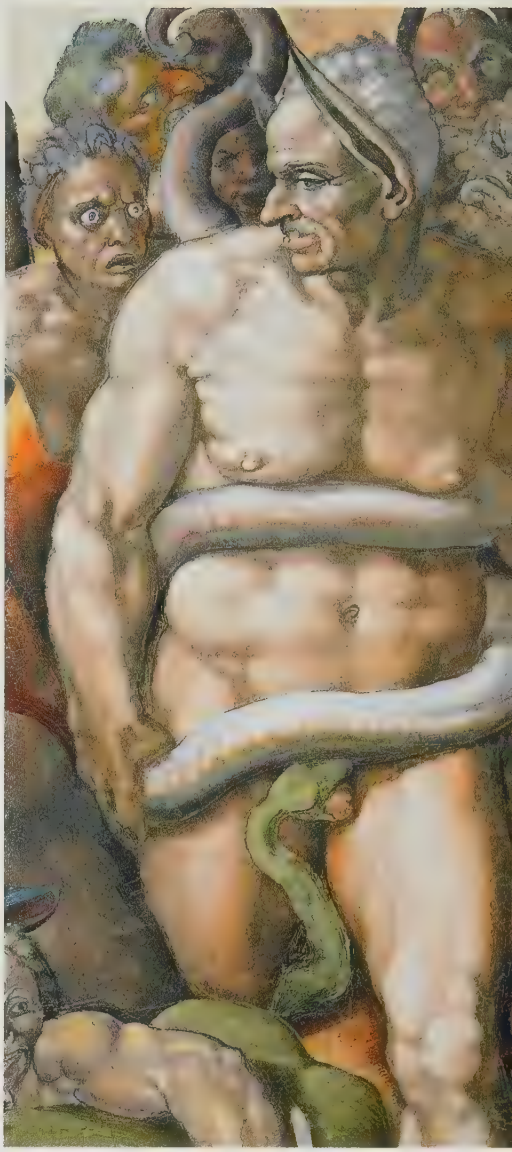
Vasari tells us that as soon as he noticed this, the enraged Biagio went to the Pope, saying: 'Holiness, you cannot imagine, Michelangelo has painted me in the Last Judgement*'. Hiding a smile, Paul III replied gravely: 'I shall pray for you, but it depends on where Michelangelo has put you; if it happens to be in Hell not even the Pope can intervene'. And Biagio remained for ever the guardian of Hades.*

The recent cleaning has shed even more light on Michelangelo's appalling joke and Biagio's furious reaction. Once the layer of dirt and some later additions had been removed, it was discovered that the serpent forming the tail of Minos has a head, and it is biting a very delicate part of his anatomy. What a cruel trick to play!

The amazing fresco of the *Last Judgement* was finished in 1541, after five years of solitary work.

On the evening of 31 October, Paul III celebrated the completion of the work on the Sistine Chapel with solemn vespers.

Vasari wrote: 'This work filled the whole of Rome with astonishment and wonder'.



GALLERY OF THE APOSTOLIC LIBRARY

Since the introduction of a one-way tour, anyone wishing to return to the museum entrance through the lower corridor will have to leave by the small door on the left, near the back of the Chapel. If instead you wish to reach the basilica and Saint Peter's Square, it is best to leave by the door on the far right of the chapel.

ROOM OF THE ALDOBRANDINI MARRIAGE

This was constructed in 1611, and the ceiling was decorated with scenes from the *Life of Samson* by Guido Reni. The room takes its name from the celebrated fresco it houses, which was discovered in 1605 near the Arch of Gallienus in Via di San Vito on the Esquiline Hill. This is almost unanimously regarded as one of the finest and best preserved paintings of antiquity.

The Aldobrandini Marriage first century AD
Fresco

It depicts a nuptial allegory. In the centre, cloaked in green and sitting on a grand bed, is the bride. Beside her is Peitho, the Greek goddess of persuasion, who is trying to overcome her apparent reluctance or uncertainty about the marriage.

Sitting at the foot of the bed, his head crowned with flowers, we recognise the waiting Hymen, the Greek god who presided over weddings and who personified the nuptial song, during which he was ritually invoked. The figures immediately on the left have, alas, been heavily repainted, but the others allow us to see the fluency of the hand of an unknown but fine painter from the Julio-Claudian period (first century AD), and to appreciate the sense of depth and form he achieved with chiaroscuro hatching.

Works like this give us an insight into the artistic heights attained by classical artists. Alas, these standards were not maintained during the Middle Ages, not through any lack of good taste, but for appallingly practical reasons like war, famine and poverty. It took 1,200 years for the greatness of the ancients to be rediscovered, when artists such as Giotto and Masaccio showed the world that the beauty of antiquity was alive again.

The fresco belonged to Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini, the nephew of Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605) and to begin with it was kept in one of the pavilions of the Villa Aldobrandini on Largo Magnanapoli.

Until the discovery of the frescoes at Herculaneum (in 1709) and Pompeii (in 1763) it was one of very few examples of painting from antiquity and undoubtedly the best. It was admired, studied and copied by artists, including Nicolas Poussin and Anthony van Dyck. Indeed, it was a touchstone for Classicism throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1818 the *Aldobrandini Marriage* was moved to the Vatican.

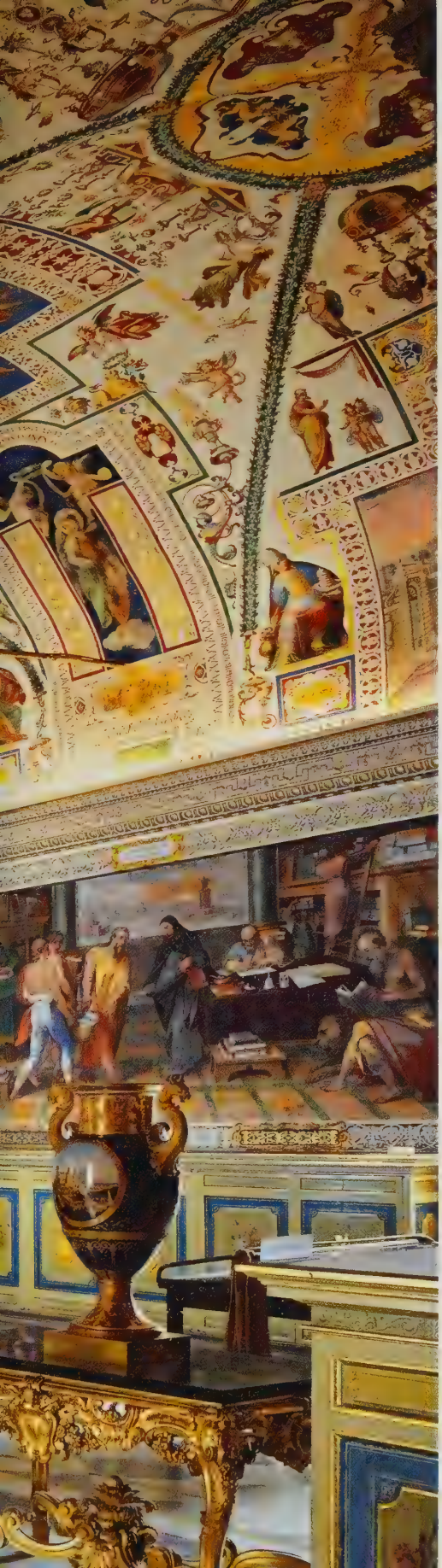
Planisphere 1528/1529
Girolamo da Verrazzano (*c.* 1485–1528/1529)
Parchment

Around a third of the way down the long corridor (The Gallery of Urban VIII), exhibited in a wide vertical display case on the right, is a large parchment with a reproduction of the world which was quite extraordinary for its time.

Europe and Africa appear almost perfectly outlined and in great detail, Asia a little less so. What is astonishing is the representation of the American continent, which had been discovered by Christopher Columbus only 36 years before this map was produced. South America had only been circumnavigated, yet despite that, this representation mirrors its real contours almost perfectly. North America had not yet been explored. Just above Florida we can clearly make out the inscription 'TERRA INCOGNITA', indicating unknown land.

The map is the outstanding achievement of Girolamo da Verrazzano. As cartographer, he participated in the expedition of 1523–29, guided by his brother Giovanni da Verrazzano, who discovered the bay of New York and the island of Manhattan.

How did Girolamo manage to comprehend the shape of South America and make a precise drawing of it without the aid of aeroplanes or satellites? Clearly he was an exceptional mathematician. Using a sextant and looking at the stars or the rim of the sun, he managed to determine the latitude of the point where he was and place it on the *Planisphere*; but how did he work out the longitude with such precision? This is an unsolved mystery.



THE SISTINE HALL OF THE VATICAN LIBRARY

This was intended by Sixtus V to house the precious manuscripts and early printed works held in the Vatican and to make them available to scholars.

It is a vast hall with two aisles divided by seven pillars that support the cross-vaulted ceiling. It was built by Domenico Fontana between 1587 and 1589, and frescoed by various artists including Orazio Gentileschi, Paul Bril, Cesare Nebbia and Ventura Salimbeni. The frescoes illustrate primarily the new spectacular sights of Rome resulting from Sixtus V's grand urban plan for the Eternal City.

At one time the cabinets in the library contained valuable manuscripts, as the signs on them still indicate. The glass cases on the great library tables, which are now empty, safeguarded extremely important documents and precious private letters. Among these are: a copy of the *Divine Comedy* with a written dedication from Petrarch to Boccaccio; a love letter from Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn; and, in particular, one of Michelangelo's letters, written to his father in Florence while he was engaged on the work in the Sistine Chapel.

THE APOSTOLIC PALACE

Out of respect for the privacy of the Supreme Pontiff, and to keep it available for the solemn ceremonies that take place there, the Apostolic Palace, or Pontifical Palace, is usually closed to the public. However, from an art history point of view, we think it is important to illustrate at least three of the masterpieces in the Palace. These may be seen only with permission, which is rarely granted.

The Sala Regia

This is connected to the Sistine Chapel by the great doorway at the far end. This large and elegant room was the project of Pope Paul III, who also commissioned the *Last Judgement*. Antonio da Sangallo the Younger was given the task of restructuring the pre-existing site.

The room was called the Sala Regia ('Royal Room') because here the Pope received sovereigns from all over the world when they visited Rome. Nowadays, this is where the Holy Father formally receives the ambassadors accredited to the Holy See.

The barrel-vaulted ceiling has elegant stuccoed coffering that is the work of Perino del Vaga. The other stucco work above the doors and along the walls is by Daniele da Volterra. The large frescoes on the walls are by Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccari. They illustrate key events in the history of the Church.

THE SALA DUCALE

The Sala Ducale (Ducal Room) is entered from the Sala Regia. This extremely elegant room was created in 1657 by knocking down the wall that divide two adjacent rooms. In its place Gian Lorenzo Bernini built a solid arch, which is concealed by magnificent stucco-work drapery held up by cherubs in flight. The room was then decorated with frescoes and grotesques by various artists, including Raffaellino da Reggio.

Beneath the elegant vaulted ceiling important ecumenical meetings are held.

CAPPELLA PAOLINA

This is connected to the Sala Regia by a door. The chapel was built by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger in 1540, at the request of Paul III.

In November 1542, a year after the completion of the *Last Judgement*, Paul III asked the 67-year-old Michelangelo to fresco the walls of the newly built chapel. The artist agreed to execute what would be his final pictorial work.

The Conversion of Saint Paul 1542–46
Michelangelo (1475–1564)

On the left wall Michelangelo painted the *Conversion of Saint Paul*. This scene illustrates what happened to Saint Paul (until then called Saul) as he was on his way with a group of soldiers to arrest the Christians of Damascus. The New Testament (Acts of the Apostles 9: 3, 4) tells us that 'as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him: And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"'

Michelangelo aimed to give this episode more of a mystical than an historical character. The powerful divine light that blinds Saul, placed deliberately off centre, throws the scene into disorder and makes it almost incorporeal. The agitation of the scene recalls the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. Here too God is on high and humanity is below, and here too there are two focal points: God, upon whom the angels and saints converge, and Saul, from whom his companions flee, taking fright.

One thing is strange: at the time of Saul's conversion he would have been less than 50-years-old. Why then does he appear in the fresco as a much older man? Almost certainly because Michelangelo intended to leave us a self-portrait, disguising this with a beard that was perhaps longer and whiter than the one he wore.

The two soldiers in the lower right seem to be entering the fresco from below, almost as if drawing the viewer inside the scene to participate in its events.

The Crucifixion of Saint Peter 1546–50
Michelangelo (1475–1564)

The second fresco painted in the Cappella Paolina shows the crucifixion of Saint Peter, which took place around 67 AD, at the circus of Nero where the Vatican now stands. The old apostle Peter asked to be crucified upside-down, because he did not regard himself as worthy to die in the manner of Jesus.

The cross has not yet been raised, one of the executioners is digging the hole. Saint Peter accepts his martyrdom.

Let us bear in mind that, after being persuaded to leave Rome in order to save himself, Peter met Christ on the Appian Way, and, in wonderment, asked him: 'Quo vadis Domine?' ('Where are you going, Lord?'). With Christ's answer, 'I am going to Rome to be crucified again', he realised that it was not a worthy act for the of the head of the church to flee and save himself, so he turned back to accept martyrdom.

Peter is nailed down, but he still has time to turn his intense gaze to the crowd, and this is worth any amount of preaching!

In the crowd there is only one real response: the young man with the green tunic attempts to oppose this flagrant injustice, but he is swiftly silenced and stopped by the other terrified Christians.

When he finished this last pictorial work, Michelangelo was 75. His patron Paul III was also very old, then 82. Despite his age, the pontiff wished to make a final homage to his protégé: two months before he died, he slowly climbed a ladder to admire the almost completed fresco from up close, and he enthusiastically congratulated Michelangelo.

Saint Peter's Basilica

As a glorious crown for Peter's tomb, a first basilica was built in the fourth century AD by the Emperor Constantine over the tomb where the bones of the apostle Peter were preserved. Some 1,200 years later, Pope Julius II ordered the architect Donato Bramante to build a new and grander church. Work began on 18 April 1506.

The drum, the enormous structure supporting the cupola, was built under the direction of the 82-year-old Michelangelo over a period of seven years (1557–64). It is divided by sixteen double columns, between which are large windows. After the death of Michelangelo, the work was halted for 24 years until, in 1588, Sixtus V ordered Giacomo della Porta and Domenico Fontana to complete the dome. They completed this undertaking in only 22 months, following Michelangelo's designs and calculations. Within a further seven months they added the fine pointed lantern at the top, the bronze ball and the cross. The total height is 137 metres, barely nine metres lower than the great Pyramid of Cheops. Powerful ribbing divides the elegant cupola into sixteen segments opened by three orders of large round windows.

When the basilica was almost finished, the Borgia pope, Paul V gave orders for the original design to be changed and extended. The final plan was no longer in the form of a Greek cross but a Latin cross. Carlo Maderno added three chapels on each side and completed the façade, erected between 1607 and 1614. When this was done the view of the dome from the square was partially obscured.

A huge order of columns and Corinthian pilasters decorates the entire façade. The central balcony, set above the main door, is the Loggia of Benedictions, from which the election of a new pope is announced and the pope's solemn blessing *Urbi et Orbi* is given. Above the attic storey of the façade are thirteen gigantic statues by the school of Bernini, 5.7 metres high, representing the Redeemer, John the Baptist and eleven apostles (the statue of Saint Peter is on the forecourt of the basilica, along with that of Saint Paul). On either side there are large clocks, added by the Italian architect Giuseppe Valadier in 1795.

In front of the church are three short flights of steps, the work of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, leading to the spacious forecourt of the basilica. On either side of the stairway stand the gigantic statues of Saint Peter, displaying the keys he has received from Christ, and Saint Paul, holding the sword that symbolises his decapitation in Rome. The two statues, as if to protect the basilica of Christianity, were placed there in 1847.

The great building on the right (above the right flank of the colonnade) is the Apostolic Palace, the residence of the pope. It was built by Domenico Fontana between 1585 and 1590 for Sixtus V. At midday every Sunday, the pope appears at the second-last window on the right of the building's top floor, to say the Angelus with the faithful and give his apostolic blessing.

The magnificent colonnade surrounding Saint Peter's Square was erected by Gian Lorenzo Bernini between 1656 and 1666, during the papacy of Alexander VII. Bernini's architectural and religious idea was to create two great arms that clasp the heart of humanity. The colonnade forms an ellipse 240 metres wide, comprising 284 monumental columns and 88 pilasters; these are made of travertine from Tivoli (the same stone as the Colosseum). To crown the colonnade, Bernini's pupils sculpted 140 statues of saints 3.2 metres high. The overall effect is one of such beauty and solemnity that it takes your breath away.

The Portico

The five great bronze doors of the basilica open into the vast portico, which is the work of Carlo Maderno. It is 71 metres long, 13.5 metres wide and 20 metres high.

The first on the left is the Door of Death, a work by Giacomo Manzù (1963); the second is the Door of Good and Evil, a work by Luciano Minguzzi (1977); the central door is that of the old Basilica of Saint Peter, a work by the Florentine artist Filarete, who cast it in 1445; the fourth is the door of the Sacraments, the work of Venanzio Crocetti (1965); the fifth (the first if you enter the portico from the Sistine Chapel) is the famous Porta Santa (Holy Door), which is open only during Jubilees so that pilgrims can enter the basilica and receive the special Jubilee blessing. The panels (1950) are the work of Vico Consorti (born 1902).

The Interior of the Basilica

When Julius II asked Bramante to build a new basilica, the architect replied that in creating this grand new edifice he would take his inspiration from the Pantheon and from the Basilica of Maxentius in the Roman Forum, superimposing the former onto the latter. If we look at the majestic interior of Saint Peter's, we can recognise its similarities with those two magnificent Roman monuments. The cupola, the work of Michelangelo, is almost as wide as that of the Pantheon. The dimensions and the structure, and in particular the splendid coffered vault of Saint Peter's, are very similar to those of the Basilica of Maxentius, which is still partly preserved in the Roman Forum. The dimensions are on a vast scale, but so perfectly calibrated and proportioned that they are not obvious immediately. For example, the baldachin set over the tomb of the apostle Peter reaches a height of 29 metres, including the cross; this is higher than a nine-storey building; but in the middle of the towering central nave and beneath the vast cupola it almost shrinks to nothing. The basilica is 193 metres long (218 metres, if we include the portico); the central nave is 45 metres high, almost the height of a fifteen-storey building.

The Pietà 1498–99
Michelangelo (1475–1564)
White Carrara marble, height 174 cm

Michelangelo was only 23 years old when he was summoned to Rome to carve the *Pietà*. He finished the work in just one year, and it astounded all those who saw it.

Giorgio Vasari records that Michelangelo, who was famous in Florence but not yet in Rome or other cities, entered Saint Peter's one day and found there 'a large number of Lombard visitors who were praising it greatly, one of whom asked of another who had made it, and he answered "our Hunchback of Milan"'.

The young Michelangelo was obviously not pleased to hear his labours attributed to someone else (the visitors were referring to the sculptor Cristoforo Solario, known as il Gobbo, 'the hunchback'). One night he went back to Saint Peter's and, by the light of the candle that he had brought with him, engraved his name in capital letters on the sash slung across the Virgin Mary's breast. The Pietà is the only signed work by Michelangelo.

Carved out of a single block of Carrara marble, the statue is very beautiful, but it displays a manifest contradiction: the face of the Madonna seems too young by comparison with that of her son. I am convinced that this is not a misjudgement on the part of Michelangelo. Bearing in mind that the young artist lost his mother when he was only six, it is possible that he wished to see the features of his dead young mother in the face of the Virgin.

There is a new theory, however, formulated by the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, that perhaps throws greater light on the youth of the Madonna and other details of the statue. In Michelangelo's mind the *Pietà* might depict the 'Vision of the Virgin Mary', an episode in which the Madonna, at a very young age (according to the Gospels she was thirteen or fourteen years old), was holding the Child in her arms and she had a vision, or premonition: Jesus would be killed in an appalling manner, by crucifixion. At that moment the Madonna accepted the will of God and prepared for her sorrowful fate.

Let us look again at the statue to notice that the Madonna is not looking at the face of Christ but looking down, as if she had the Infant Jesus in her arms. Her right arm is tenderly supporting the head of Jesus, as if cradling a baby. Look at the movement of the Madonna's left arm: there is not only grief in this gesture, but above all acceptance. It seems almost to say: 'What can I do? This is the will of God'.

This new theory is proved by the different scales of the two figures. If we look carefully, we see that the body of the Madonna is much bigger than that of Jesus in every detail. Try to picture the two figures standing: the Virgin Mary is much taller than Jesus. This cannot be a mistake in the proportions; in Florence the young Michelangelo had already sculpted masterpieces like *The Battle of the Centaurs* and *The Madonna of the Stairs*. The discrepancy in scale is not an imprecision but a message.

In 1964 this very beautiful statue was sent temporarily to New York for the Universal Exhibition, as a messenger of faith and art. In Rome in 1972, a mentally disturbed individual climbed onto the statue and struck the lovely face with a hammer, as well as knocking off the Madonna's left arm. The damage is now perfectly repaired, but, to preserve this masterpiece for future generations, a decision was made to to keep it safe behind unbreakable plate glass.


NI CAELORVM TV ES PETRVS
FIDES
MVND

Statue of Saint Peter thirteenth century
Arnolfo di Cambio (*c.*1245–1302/10)
Bronze

The bronze statue of Saint Peter, giving his blessing and holding the keys, is very likely the work of the great Tuscan artist Arnolfo di Cambio. Out of devotion, the faithful stroke and kiss the feet of Saint Peter. This age-old practice has greatly worn away the right foot of the venerable sculpture.

Every year on 29 June, the feast of Saint Peter, the statue of the first Pope is covered with a sumptuous red and gold pontifical robe. The triple tiara is placed on its head and the papal Fisherman's Ring on its middle finger.


VNA FIDES

Baldacchin 1624–33
Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) and
Francesco Borromini (1599–1667)
Bronze

Rising up grandly in the middle of the nave is the baldachin which protects and honours the tomb of Saint Peter, the first apostle and the first Pope.

This is the consummate work of two artists: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who designed it when he was only 26 years old, and his collaborator Francesco Borromini, a year younger, who designed and constructed the upper part and carried out most of the technical calculations for its execution.

It is the largest and heaviest bronze work in the world, but its visual appearance is not massive and invasive. This is because of the magnificent spiral columns created by Bernini and the elegant volutes at the top of the baldachin designed by Borromini.

The baldachin was commissioned by the Barberini pope Urban VIII, and set all over it are the heraldic bees of his coat of arms.

Under the baldachin is the papal altar. It is placed vertically above the sepulchre of the first pope, and only the supreme Pontiff can celebrate holy mass on it, with others concelebrating as the case may be.

The Altar of the Cathedra 1658–66
Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680)
Bronze

This enormous work in gilt bronze, weighing more than 121 tons, was executed by Bernini at the request of Pope Alexander VII, between 1658 and 1666.

It is a magnificent reliquary made to hold what in Bernini's day was regarded as being the papal throne of Saint Peter. In fact, the great bronze throne contains another medieval throne in wood and inlaid ivory. We are almost certain that this is the throne given to Pope John VIII by Charles the Bald in the year 875, when the latter was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Saint Peter's.

The bronze throne also opulently represents the seat and authority of the Pontiff. When he defines questions of faith or morality, the supreme Pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, or from the throne. The throne appears suspended in the sky. Four of the Church Fathers — Ambrose and Augustine, wearing tall mitres, with Athanasius and John Chrysostom — lightly touch the throne, while not actually supporting it, as a sign of devotion and loyalty.

The upper part shows the dove of the Holy Spirit within a glory of angels. The best time to see it is in the afternoon, when the rays of the sun make the vast 'monstrance' (the liturgical object for displaying the Host of the Eucharist for adoration) that is formed around the dove even more luminous.

The Cupola

The magnificent cupola rests upon the monumental structure created by the architect Donato Bramante. The four gigantic piers are his, and each has a circumference of 71 metres. On these rest the majestic connecting arches, each 45 metres high and 23 metres wide.

At the age of 82, Michelangelo constructed the vertical section of the cupola, the tambour or drum, including the large windows, the twin pilasters and the cornice. In 1564, the genius of the Renaissance died, at the age of 89. No one had the courage, strength and capacity required to complete the cupola, and the basilica remained uncovered for almost 24 years.

It took the coming of a strong new pope, Sixtus V, and two good architects, Giacomo della Porta and Domenico Fontana, for the dome to be completed, largely in accordance with Michelangelo's designs and calculations. Finally, in 1590, this magnificent new work was inaugurated.

The dimensions are vast. With a diameter of 42.56 metres, it is still the biggest brick-built dome in the world (only 74 cm less than Hadrian's dome for the Pantheon, which, at 43.30 metres, remains the widest concrete dome ever built in the world). Inside, the cupola of Saint Peter's is 106 metres high, to which should be added a further 14 metres to the topmost tip of the lantern, raising the height of the cupola to 120 metres.

Seen from below, the grandeur of the cupola is breathtaking. The French writer Madame de Staël described it as 'an enormous abyss opening up above our heads'. The cupola's vast scale is conveyed by the fact that it could contain a building almost 40 storeys high, even the Statue of Liberty, which measures 93 metres to the tip of her torch.

The rich mosaics that decorate the vault were done in 1605 from cartoons by Giuseppe Cesari known as the Cavalier d'Arpino. Again, to grasp how huge these are, even though they do not seem so, we need only to consider the four Evangelists depicted on the pendentives supporting the cupola. They are engrossed in writing the Gospels, using goose quills. It is hard to imagine that each quill is the height of a person. This is something you can see by watching people as they move around the circular gallery inside the cupola. The best spot for observing this is close to the big statue of Saint Andrew.


ALEXANDER VII

The Monument to Alexander VII 1671–78
Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680)
Mixed marbles

This is the last work by the almost 80-year-old Bernini, aided by his pupils.

The old sculptor and architect felt great friendship and gratitude towards the Chigi pope, Alexander VII, who had recently died. From him he had received the commissions for the Sala Regia, the colonnade in Saint Peter's Square and the Altar of the Cathedra. For Alexander VII, Bernini succeeded in creating his final masterpiece; a masterpiece of ideas, colour and technique.

A door, which still leads outside of the basilica, occupied part of the niche and made it impossible for Bernini to use all of the existing space. The genius of the Baroque was not dispirited and, like all great artists, turned the problem into a creative stimulus. A skeleton, Death, lifts up a heavy drapery (thereby leaving space for the door to be used). The magnificent drapery is made from an elegant hard stone, Sicilian jasper.

Death shows the Pope that the sand in its hourglass has run out. This is a very explicit message: his time is over. Death also covers its head with the drapery – it does not see, or rather does not wish to see, the one to whom it bears its message. In this way Death communicates another forceful but less obvious message. When time has run out, it has run out for everyone, whatever their class, wealth or power.

The four figures at the Pope's feet indicate his virtues. Charity, on the left, nurtures a child that is not her own; Truth is on the right; behind them are Prudence and Justice.

A veil of white-enamelled metal was added later to cover up the nakedness of Charity and Truth.

Detail showing the thorn

Pope Alexander VII attempted in various ways to resolve the problem of the Anglican Church's split from Rome, which had been brought about in the previous century by Henry VIII when, with the Act of Supremacy in 1534, he took the pope's place and established himself as head of the English Church. Repeatedly the pope sent his delegates with proposals for agreement, but all in vain. The last years of his papacy were tormented by this sorrow. In his monument to the pope, Bernini succeeded in commemorating this event with a detail that was subtle but very clear. Oddly, this detail has escaped most people's notice.

The face of Truth seems sad and distressed. Her left foot rests upon the globe. If you look carefully, you will see that she cannot set down her whole foot because a large thorn is piercing her big toe. The thorn, which comes from England, has wounded Truth.

The Tomb of Saint Peter in the Vatican Grottoes

The Vatican Grottoes extend below the central nave of the basilica, occupying the space between the floor of the old Constantinian basilica and the present one. In these, 147 popes are laid to rest, beside the tomb of the first pope.

At one time you could see the tomb of Saint Peter, located under the papal altar, only from the floor of the basilica above. On 16 October 1979, His Holiness John Paul II had the great arch in the Vatican Crypt opened up so that the tomb of Peter could be seen from a closer vantage point.

Through the arch with its prominent inscription 'SEPULCRUM SANCTI PETRI APOSTOLI', we see Carlo Maderno's *confessio* clad in coloured marble. *Confessio* was the term used by the early Christians to describe tombs of those who had 'confessed' their own faith and been martyred for it.

In the middle of the sumptuous wall we see a niche that corresponds to the lower part of a *sacellum*, seen and described by the ecclesiastical writer Gaius in the second century. The niche was subsequently decorated with a nineth-century mosaic of Christ.

The *sacellum*, a two-storey funeral chamber, was constructed in the second half of the second century AD to honour the burial of Saint Peter. When the first basilica was built, in the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine had the bones removed from the lower level to prevent them from deteriorating completely in the damp, and had them placed, wrapped in a cloth of purple and gold, in an external cavity hollowed out in the sacellum. There they were found in the course of excavations carried out at the instigation of Pius XII, during the Second World War, and they are still kept there, their presence indicated by an oil lamp that is always lit, high on the right-hand side of the sacellum.

The precious eighteenth-century silver casket, which can be seen inside, contains the pallia, the long, narrow, white stoles embroidered with black silk crosses, which are blessed beside the tomb of Saint Peter, the first pope, and are bestowed by the pontiff, in a special ceremony, on the new metropolitan archbishops, those with jurisdiction over important cities or provincial diocesan capitals.

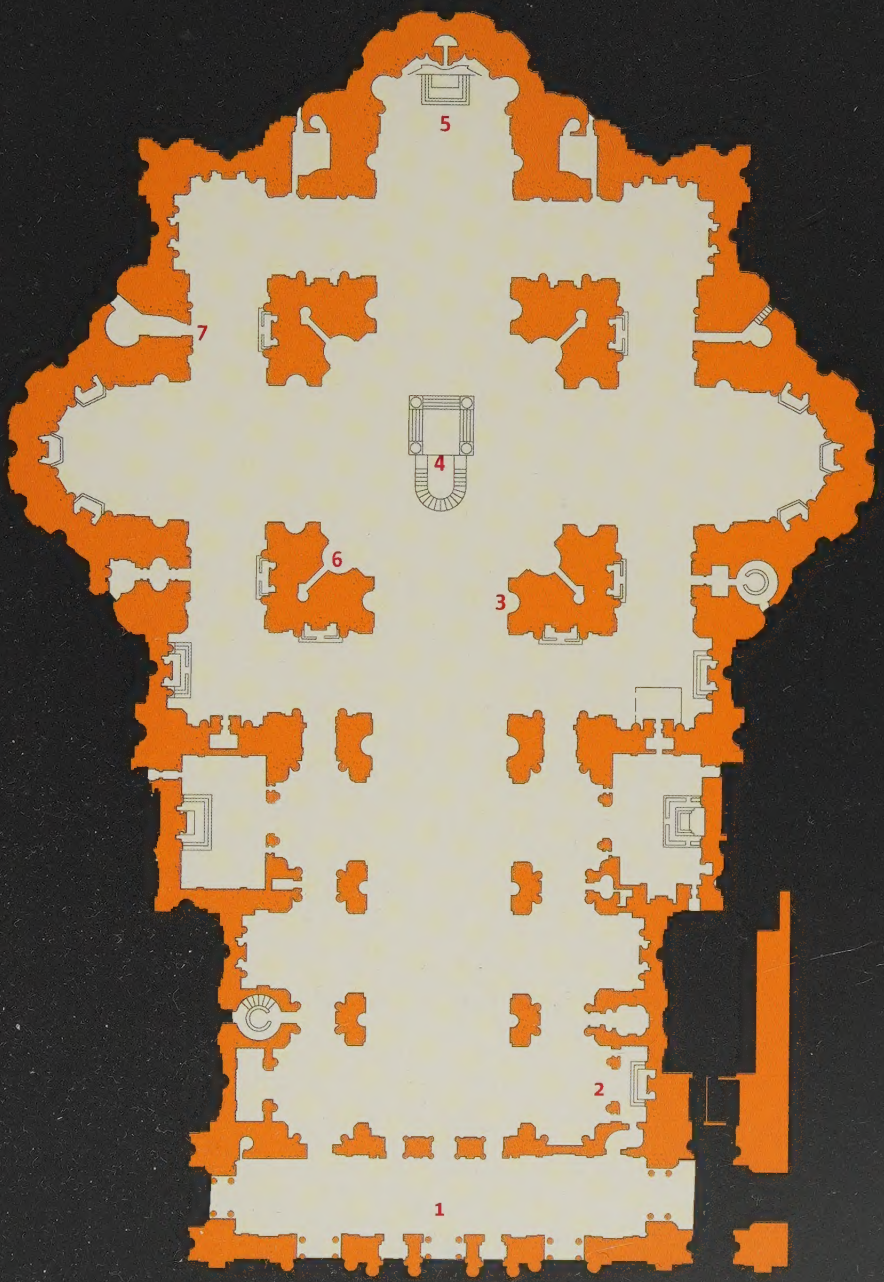

SEPULCRUM
CTI PETRI APOSTOLI

INDEX

Agesander 30–31
Aldobrandini Marriage, The 137–138
Alexander VI, portrait 84–85
Alighieri, Dante, portrait 70–71, 77
Altar of the Cathedra 153
Amphora with Achilles and Ajax 40
Angel as Musician Playing a Lute 12–13
Angelico, Fra 10–11, 56–59
Apartments of Julius II 48–81
Apollo Belvedere, The 28
Apollonios of Athens 35
Apostolic Palace 140–145
Apoxyomenos (Athlete Washing Himself) 24
Arnolfo di Cambio 151
Athenodoros 30–31
***B**aldacchin* 152–153
Baptism of Christ, The 94–95
Bartolomeo della Gatta 92–93
Basilica of Saint Peter 146–159
Battle of the Milvian Bridge, The 48–49
Belvedere Torso, The 35
'Berlin Painter', The 41
Bernini, Gian Lorenzo 142–143, 146–147, 152–153, 156–157
Biagio di Antonio 90–91
Borgia Rooms 82–85
Borgia, Lucrezia, portrait 82–83
Borromini, Francesco 152–153
Botticelli, Sandro 88–89, and pupils 92–93, 94–95
Bramante, Donato 24, 26–27, 54–55, 154–155, portrait 70–73
***C**alling of Peter and Andrew, The* 96–97
Capella Paolina 144–145
Caravaggio 20–21
Cavalier d'Arpino 154–155
Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel 102–129
Chapel of Pope Nicholas V 56–59
Charity of Saint Laurence, The 58–59
Christ with Saint Laurence and Saint Bartholomew 132–133
Clement VII, portrait 50–51
Collection of Greek Vases 40–41
Consorti, Vico 148
Conversion of Saint Paul, The 144
Creation of Adam, The 112–113
Creation of Eve, The 114–115
Creation of the Sun and the Moon, The 108–109
Crocetti, Venanzio 148
Crossing of the Red Sea, The 90–91
Crucifixion of Saint Peter, The 22–23, 144–145
Cupola (external) 146–147
Cupola (internal) 154–155
Danti, Antonio 46–47
Death of Moses, The 92–93
della Porta, Giacomo 146–147, 154–155
Delivery of the Keys to Saint Peter, The 98–99
Delphic Sibyl, The 124–125
Deposition, The 20–21
Disputation on the Holy Sacrament, The 70–71
Disputation of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, The 82–83
Donation of Constantine, The 50–51
Door of Death 148
Door of Good and Evil 148
Door of the Sacraments 148
Drunkenness of Noah, The 122–123
Egyptian Museum 38
Etruscan Museum 39–41
Exekias 40
Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple, The 62–63
***F**ibula, The* 38–39
Filarete 148
Fire in the Borgo 78–79
Flood, The 120–121
Fontana, Domenico 138–139, 146–147, 154–155
Gallery of the Apostolic Library 137
Gallery of the Candelabra 42–43
Gallery of Maps 46–47
Gallery of Tapestries 44–45
Ghirlandaio, Domenico 96–97
Giotto 8–9
Girolamo da Verrazzano 136–137
Giulio Romano 48–9, 50–1, 78–79
***H**ermes* 29
Holy Door 148
Hydria with Apollo 41
John Paul II 158
Journey of Moses into Egypt, The 88–89
Julius II 15, 27, 62–65, 67–71
***L**aocoön* 30–31
Last Judgement, The 130–135
Last Supper, The 100–101
Leo I Repulsing Attila 66–67
Leo X 66–67, 78
Leochares 28
Leonardo da Vinci 18–19, portrait 72–73
Liberation of Saint Peter, The 60–61
Libyan Sibyl, The 126–127
Life of Jesus, The 94–101
Life of Moses, The 88–93
Lysippus 24
Mascherino, Ottaviano 46–47
Maderno, Carlo 146–7, 158–159
Main entrance to the Vatican museums 6–7
Manzù, Giacomo 148
Mars of Todi, The 39
Mass of Bolsena, The 64–65
Melandri, Pietro 6–7
Meleager 33
Melozzo da Forlì 12–13, 14–15
Mentuhotep, Head of King 38
Michelangelo 102–135, 144–145, 148–150
Minguzzi, Luciano 148
Minos (Biagio da Cesena) 135
Momo, Giuseppe 6–7
Angelo da Montorsoli 28, 30–31
Monument to Alexander VII 156–157
Mosaic with Still Life 42–43
Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law 90–91
Muziano, Girolamo 46–47
Nebbia, Cesare 46–47, 138–139
Octagonal Courtyard 26–33
Papal Apartments, Former 46–85
Parnassus 76–77
Paul III 140–141
Paul V 146–147
Penni, Giovan Francesco 50–51, 78–79
Perugino 80–81, 88–89, 94–95, 98–99
Picture Gallery 9–23
Pietà, The 148–150
Pinturicchio 82–83, 84–85, 94–95
Pio-Clementino Museum 24–37
Planisphere 136–137
Polydorus of Rhodes 30–31
Porta Santa 148
Portico of St Peter's Basilica 148–149
Praxiteles 32-3, school of 29
Prophet Isaiah, The 127
Prophet Jonah, The 128–129
Punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, The 92–93
Raffaellino da Reggio 142–143
Raphael 16–17, 54–55, 60–67, 68–77, school of 78–81
Raphael's Loggia 54–55
Raphael's Stanze 60–81
Reni, Guido 22–23
Resurrection, The 84–85
Resurrection of Christ, The 44–45
Room of the Aldobrandini Marriage 136–137
Room of the Mysteries of the Faith 84–85
Room of the Saints 82–83
Rosselli, Cosimo 90–91, 96–97, 100–101
***S**acrifice of Noah, The* 118–119
Saint Jerome 18–19
Saint Peter, Statue of 151
Saint Peter's Basilica 146–159
Saint Stephen Preaching 58–59
Sala a Croce Greca 37
Sala dei Chiaroscuri 52–55
Sala di Costantino 48–51
Sala Ducale 142–143
Sala Regia 140–141
Sala Rotonda 36–37
Sarcophagus of Saint Helen, The 37
Scenes from the Legend of Saint Nicholas 10–11
School of Athens, The 72–75
Scopas 33
Self-portrait of Michelangelo 132–133
Self-portrait of Raphael 74
Separation from Light and Darkness, The 106–107
Separation of Land and Sea, The 110–111
Sermon on the Mount and Healing of the Lepers, The 96–97
Signorelli, Luca 92–93
Simonetti, Michelangelo 26–27, 34–35, 36–37
Sistine Chapel 87–135
Sistine Hall of the Vatican Library 138–139
Sixtus IV and Platina 14–15
Sixtus IV, portrait 70–71
Sixtus V 146–147
Spiral stairway 24–25
Stanza d'Eliodoro 61
Stanza dell'Incendio di Borgo 78–81
Stanza della Segnatura 68–77
Stefaneschi Triptych, The 8–9
***T**emptation and Expulsion, The* 116–117
Temptation in the Wilderness, The 94–95
Toilet of Venus, The 32–33
Tomb of Saint Peter in the Vatican Grottoes 158–159
Transfiguration, The 16–17
Trumpeting Angels, The 134–135
Vault of the Chapel of Nicholas V 56–57
Vault of the Stanza del Incendio di Borgo 80–81
Girolamo da Verrazzano 136–137
***W**inged Angel as Musician* 12–13
Zuccari, Taddeo and Federico 52–53, 55, 140–141

BASILICA

1 Portico
2 *Pietà*
3 Statue of Saint Peter
4 Baldacchin
5 Altar of the Cathedra
6 Statue of Saint Andrew
7 Monument to Alexander VII



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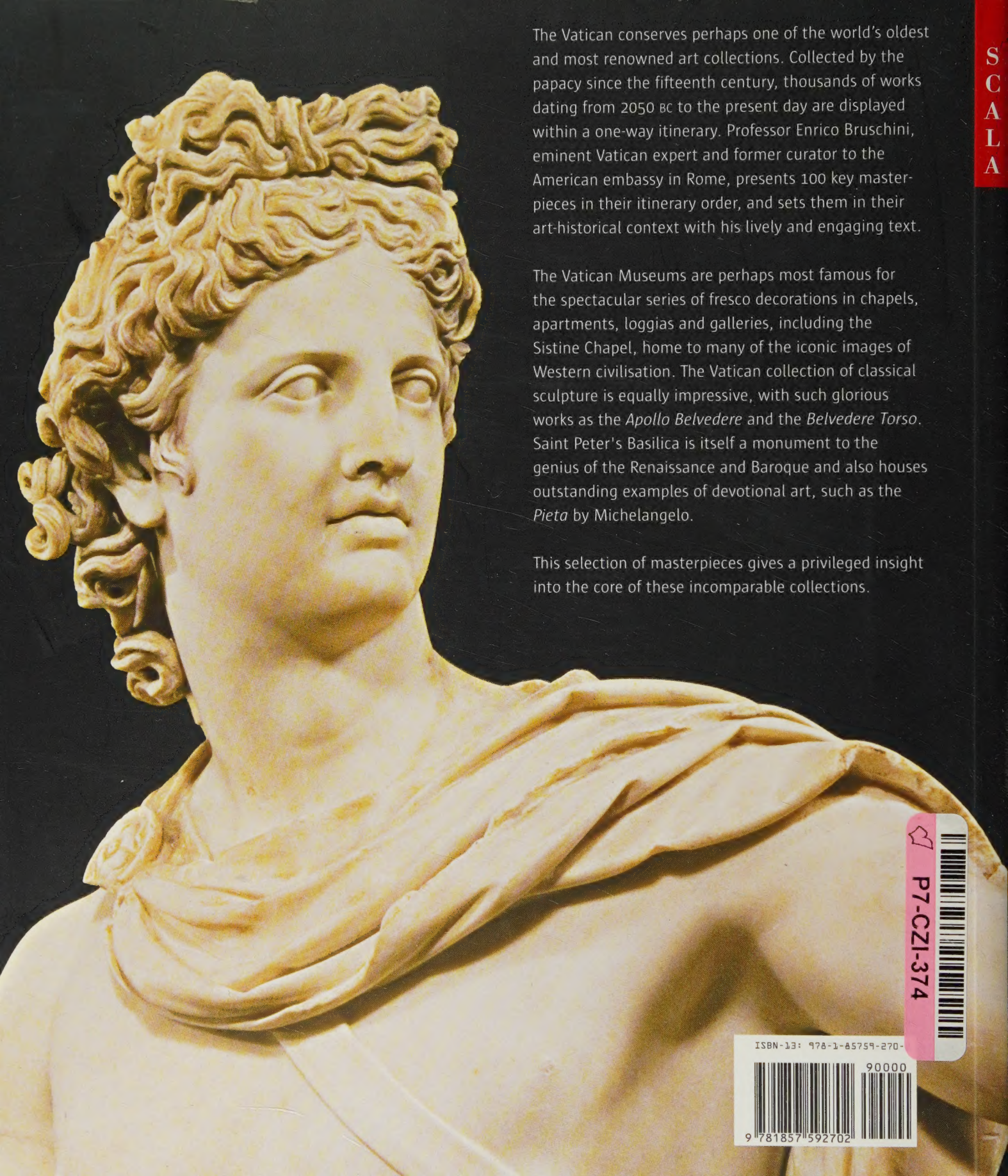

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ISBN-13: 978-1-85759-270-

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