

## SUNDAY THEOLOGY CLASS ON ART AND SPIRITUALITY

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### MICHELANGELO'S LAST JUDGMENT

#### 1\_Christ the All-Powerful Judge<sup>1</sup>

1. 1541, Christmas day: Pope **Paul III** opens the doors of the Sistine Chapel to reveal the new fresco to the world.
2. What People actually saw was different from what we see today – we know it from the uncensored **copy of the original made by Marcello Venusti** (1512-1579), in the Capodimonte Museum of Naples
3. People were both horrified and fascinated with the figures of Saint Catherine and Saint Blaise.
4. Nakedness
  - 4.1. While public nakedness was still frowned upon, depicting it in art demonstrated the artist's bona fides as a Renaissance humanist.
  - 4.2. Even Jesus, instead of being clothed with lordly robes, enters the world naked, except for a single cloth draped across his loins
    - i. The nakedness of Michelangelo's Christ is directly inspired by the ancient Greek texts and sculptures.
    - ii. For the Greeks, the gods were perfect, and the best way to depict that perfection was to sculpt them or paint them naked.
    - iii. Their nakedness was a sign of their perfection because the gods had nothing to hide.
  - 4.3. One of Michelangelo's direct influences when he was painting the Last Judgment was the series of frescos on the same subject painted between 1499 and 1503 by **Luca Signorelli** in the Cathedral at Orvieto.
  - 4.4. Signorelli painted a large number of nude figures in his frescos, which stand as transitions between the static Byzantine and Medieval apocalypses and Michelangelo's highly dynamic, dramatic fresco on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel.
5. **Biagio da Cesena**
  - 5.1. In 1534, while Michelangelo was painting this group of figures, Pope Paul came to visit him, bringing along the papal master of ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena.
  - 5.2. Cesena was a precise man, with regular habits and a deep concern about the rules of form. While Michelangelo looked on, Pope Paul asked Cesena what he thought of the fresco. Cesena responded that he didn't like it at all, that it seemed

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<sup>1</sup> See James A. Connor, *The Last Judgment: Michelangelo and the Death of the Renaissance* (2009).

improper to be painting all of that nudity on the wall of the Sistine Chapel, and that it was a dishonor to the site. Then he said that such pictures were better suited for roadside taverns or bath houses.

5.3. Michelangelo was furious, and when the two of them left, he decided that he would have his revenge. As soon as they were gone, he drew Cesena's likeness from memory and placed the master of ceremonies among the damned in hell as the figure of Minos, the judge of the damned. He gave him donkey's ears and wound a large green snake around his legs. Surrounding him was an army of devils.

5.4. When he saw this, Biagio Cesena was horrified and he entreated Michelangelo to remove the portrait, but the artist refused. Then he went to Pope Paul and asked him to order Michelangelo to do so, but Pope Paul, thinking the whole thing was very funny, said, "Had Michelangelo sent you to Purgatory, I could intercede for you. But since he has placed you in hell, I have no power to save you."

6. **Pietro Aretino** (1492-1556) wrote a letter to Michelangelo that was filled with moralistic indignation:

By placing art above faith, those who are Christian makes a spectacle by showing martyrs and virgins with such a lack of decorum. The look of the man who was grabbed by his testicles makes one avert his eyes to avoid seeing it, just as if one were standing in a brothel. Faith that is expressed in such a way that it undermines the faith of others is more sinful than atheism.<sup>2</sup>

6.1. There seemed to be too much art and not enough religion

6.2. this would have worked in the Renaissance but not in the Counter-Reformation.

7. **Council of Trent** (1563)

'In the sacred use of images [...] all lasciviousness be avoided in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust'. (Session XXV)

8. Following the rules decreed by the **Council of Trent**, the Pope Pius IV hired one of Michelangelo's students, Daniele da Volterra (1509-1566), to make the "corrections" to the fresco, which earned him the nickname *Il Braghettone*, or "The breeches-maker", using tempera to paint loincloths over the genitalia. Da Volterra also

8.1. totally repainted Saint Blaise and nearly

8.2. all of Saint Catherine, the two figures that had fueled the controversy over the fresco. For these areas, he had to remove the original intonaco and re-fresco the figures, retaining only Catherine's head, arms, and wheel from Michelangelo's original.

8.3. Compare with the uncensored copy of the original, by Marcello Venusti, in the Capodimonte Museum of Naples.

## Michelangelo

9. Michelangelo 1475 – 1564

10. 1508-1512

10.1. Michelangelo painted **the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel**

10.2. The composition stretches over 500 square metres of ceiling and contains over 300 figures.

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<sup>2</sup> Pietro Aretino, *Lettere e Scritte a Pietro Aretino* (Roma: Salerno, 2003, LXXXIII, p. 916.



**10.3.** At its centre are nine episodes from the Book of Genesis, divided into three groups:

- i. God's creation of the earth;
- ii. God's creation of humankind and their fall from God's grace;
- iii. and lastly, the state of humanity as represented by Noah and his family.
- iv. On the pendentives supporting the ceiling are painted twelve men and women who prophesied the coming of Jesus, seven prophets of Israel, and five Sibyls, prophetic women of the Classical world.

**10.4.** Among the most famous paintings on the ceiling are

- i. The Creation of Adam,
- ii. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,
- iii. the Deluge,
- iv. the Prophet Jeremiah,
- v. and the Cumaean Sibyl.

## **11. The Last Judgment**

**11.1.** Shortly before his death in 1534, Pope Clement VII commissioned Michelangelo to paint a fresco of The Last Judgment on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel.

**11.2.** His successor, Pope Paul III, was instrumental in seeing that Michelangelo began and completed the project, which he laboured on from 1534 to October 1541.

**12.** Altogether, there are 456 giornate in the fresco. One giornata is the section of wall that can be painted in one day.

**13.** Michelangelo designed the Last Judgment to stretch from wall to wall without a frame, creating an implied infinite space, as if the wall had disappeared and the viewer was participating in the Day of Judgment. This had the effect of drawing the viewer into the scene, causing them to question their own lives and their own place on that terrible day.

## **14. Structure**

**14.1.** Christ has come to judge the living and the dead. He is the figure in the top center

**14.2.** beside Him is His mother, the Virgin Mary.

**14.3.** On His right are the Patriarchs, the Hebrew women, Holy Virgins, and Sibyls.

**14.4.** On His left, the Apostles, the Prophets, Confessors, and Martyrs.

**14.5.** In the two arches above Him hosts of angels (without wings) bring the instruments of His Passion—the cross, the pillar at which He was scourged.

**14.6.** Just beneath Him are two martyrs;

**14.7.** and, below them, angels with trumpets, announcing His Coming.

**14.8.** At the bottom of the wall on the left men and women are rising from the dead. Angels take them up to Heaven.

**14.9.** On the right side, angels are throwing the wicked men down to Hell, where a big Devil with eyes like coals drives them off a boat and other devils pull them down into that terrible place.

**15.** There are almost four hundred figures, many of them life-size and larger.

**15.1.** Some were meant by Michelangelo to be identified.

- 15.2. For example, the big figure on Christ's left who holds the Keys to Heaven can be none other than **St. Peter**;
- 15.3. and the woman with the fragment of a wheel must be St. Catherine of Alexandria and the instrument of her martyrdom.
- 15.4. But whether Michelangelo intended to portray other specific personages from the Bible or history and even living men, no one can say for sure.
- 15.5. There is an outline of the main figures of the painting and their possible identification. It is taken from *La obra pictórica completa de Miguel Angel* in the Clásicos del arte series published by Noguer-Rizzoli Editores, Barcelona, 1968
- 16. This novel conception is no longer about reasserting social structure but about encoding a dynamic new pattern, with the sun and God in the form of Christ at the center.
- 17. In medieval and Renaissance painting it was common enough to depict holy people with halos or aureoles of light surrounding their heads.
  - 17.1. Michelangelo rejected such easy techniques and sought to depict holiness and strength of soul through facial characteristics and the stance of the body.
  - 17.2. Except **Jesus and the Virgin**, no one else in the Last Judgment has a halo.

## Christ

- 18. Dramatically, the center of the fresco is **the titanic figure of Christ**, the Son of God, in the form of Apollo, the sun god, and the universe, heaven and hell, earth and sky, struggling to receive him.
  - 18.1. The person of Christ is the fulcrum of the painting, setting all things moving.
  - 18.2. The arrival of the Son of God is the catalyst, initiating the drama, setting the universe spinning, commencing the catastrophe, and all those who surround him stare at him in awe and in terror.
  - 18.3. He is perfect action and inaction set in balance, ambiguously half-sitting, as if he is rising from a throne.
  - 18.4. His face is dispassionate, almost blank, as if the condemnation of evil and the consignment of thousands of souls to eternal fire did not affect him. He is above the common joys and fears of the human race, for in that moment he is revealed as God, terrible in his mystery, fearful in his power.
- 19. The figure of Christ is the sun, and all the souls, both blessed and damned, revolve around him.
- 20. To emphasize Jesus as the sun god he is painted clean-shaven, as a young man in the prime of his strength.
- 21. **The Reprobate**
  - 21.1. he falls toward hell, caught in the moment of realization that he has lived a lie, that his life had been one of sin, and that he belongs in hell.
  - 21.2. One hand half covers his face, as if he cannot look at what is about to happen to him. Still, he must watch and his exposed features are clenched with horror—the one exposed eye is wide, dreading everything it sees. He is terrified.
  - 21.3. **Two demons tug at the reprobate's feet**, one grabbing him around his calves and the other holding on to one foot, swinging there like dead weight to bring him down. A green snake wraps around his leg and bites him in the thigh.

- 21.4. Michelangelo depicts him in the instant of realization, the instant of judgment.<sup>3</sup>
- 21.5. As far as the viewer can see, the reprobate has no symbol of his sin, yet is labeled as a sinner because he is in the group that is falling to hell.
22. To the right of this figure, **a group of doomed souls** struggles to fight their way up to heaven, or to stay out of hell.
- 22.1. The angels are not there to help them rise, but to pummel them down to their proper place.
- 22.2. An angel in an ocher-colored tunic pushes the naked figure upside down toward hell with one hand and has the other raised in a fist as for a punch.
- 22.3. To the right of him is another figure, this time standing upright. An angel floats above him and appears ready to strike him in the face. The two grapple with each other like wrestlers, the damned trying to grab hold of the angel to keep from falling and the angel trying to shove him down.
- 22.4. Between these two figures is a man wrapped in a long white shroud covering most of his head, falling face first toward the abyss, his hands clasped in prayer. Is he praying to God for his release, or is he begging the demons all-around not to harm him?
- 22.5. At the extreme right of the group is a man in a shroud that is coming undone. His back is to the viewer but his face has turned, revealing a stark white eye and his hand stuffed into his mouth to stop him from screaming.
- 22.6. Directly beneath him is a demon who seems to be pulling on the man's testicles. Michelangelo hints in this depiction that this man's sin is of a sexual nature.
- 22.7. There is one man in the group, a naked figure upside down, with a **set of keys and a bag of gold tied to his chest. - Like St Peter - keys**
23. On the left side of the fresco opposite the damned in **the group of those who have newly arisen** there is a man being tugged by a demon with horns. But in this case, there is also an angel above him pulling him toward heaven.
24. A troop of demons in the shape of male figures with horns waits for the damned souls. They await a **boatload of the damned** who have just run aground on a protruding rock and are leaping and being dragged from the boat by the demons.
- 24.1. The leading figure, apparently the first off the boat, has his hands in fists, ready to fight.
- 24.2. Another man behind him leans over as if to grab hold of a demon.
- 24.3. There are no signs here of mutual assistance or even of teamwork. The damned souls leaving the ship are a mob, all screaming, some shrinking away from the demons, others readying to fight them.
25. Michelangelo was an avid reader of Dante's works and, according to Condivi, he had read the Divine Comedy every night for nearly a year.
- 25.1. Whether this is an exaggeration or not we will never know, but we do know that Dante filled Michelangelo with images of hell and heaven.
- 25.2. The figure of Minos was taken by Dante directly from Greek mythology. As an early Renaissance writer, his poetry was a combination of Christian theology and classical imagery. This is one of the reasons why Michelangelo chose to put Minos into his vision of hell, or at least the portal to hell.

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<sup>3</sup> Connor, James A.. The Last Judgment . St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

- 25.3. This grouping that depicted both Minos and Charon was Michelangelo's tribute to his favorite poet
  - 25.4. Charon, the second major character in this group, was described by Dante as the gatekeeper of the River Styx and the ferryman who carried the damned across the river of death to the land of the dead.
  - 25.5. To the left of the Minos group, Michelangelo painted the mouth of hell. This is the only place in the entire fresco where the spectator gets a peek at either heaven or hell.
26. This image of the cave was carefully designed for its position directly over the main altar of the chapel because Michelangelo had a dark view of the popes as the result of all the years that he lived in Rome and worked in and around the papal court. The popes were corrupt, tyrannical, and power mad and as the chapel was primarily used by the pope and his household and court, this message of condemnation was aimed at them.

## 2\_Christ the Powerless Judge

- 1. The restlessness, anguish, and excitement of this scene is in marked **contrast** to the harmony and peace emanating from **God's creation of Adam** on the ceiling, which the same Michelangelo had painted 25 years earlier.
- 2. A historic, religious, and spiritual upheaval had happened in the intervening period with the beginning of the **Protestant reformation**.
- 3. In Scripture judging and reigning are synonyms. By claiming that the 'last' judgement belongs to Christ, the New Testament affirms that, in the history of the world and in the story of each one of us, the final word belongs to God alone.
- 4. The Michelangelo who painted the Last Judgement had left behind the dream of perfection of his earlier years (**Pieta 1498-99**). He was looking for ways of alerting his contemporaries about their complacency, just as Matthew does in his stark parable of the last judgement.
- 5. Most art critics argue that in this fresco **Christ's arms** are a visual transposition of the reprobation expressed in Matthew's Gospel: "Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt 25.43).
  - 5.1. This presupposes that the center of the anticlockwise movement of the fresco is Christ's power to judge humanity by raising the dead at the bottom on the right,
  - 5.2. congregating them at his side,
  - 5.3. and removing those who deserved condemnation by plunging them towards the bottom of the fresco on his left side into hell.
- 6. There is however a deeper and more specific focal point in the fresco that adds a farcical sub-text to this plot.
- 7. Besides judgment, the theatrical position of Christ's arms is performing another function:
  - 7.1. the right arm is raised to expose the rib cage to view and the left arm ends with Christ's **index pointing at the** wound caused by the spear of the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus's body to make sure that he was definitely dead.

- 7.2. This is the wound that persuaded Christ's adversaries – and anyone whose life had been inconvenienced by this troublesome preacher - that everything was back to normal.
  - 7.3. And if he really was God as he claimed, then *God was dead*.
8. Whenever I go to the actual location of this fresco, the Sistine Chapel, I cannot avoid being intensely aware that this is a hall where so much of the course of world history is shaped:
- 8.1. this is the place where **cardinals congregate to choose the new pope**.
  - 8.2. This election has become less overtly **political** in the past century, but it cannot be denied that for most of its secular history it was marked by scheming, corruption, simony, threats and sometimes physical brutality.
  - 8.3. The act meant to epitomize the Church's commitment to let God's kingdom come through the appointment of Christ's highest representative on earth was conducted as if God was irrelevant, as if he was not acting in history, as if he was dead – and therefore as if there would never be any accountability for our human actions, especially by those who were supposed to be ministers of God.
  - 8.4. And if this was, and still is, the case of priests, bishops and popes, how much more it applies to most of us who are even more enmeshed in the secular running of the world - not only those who preside over the destiny of the nations, but each one of us, even in our relatively inconspicuous lives.
  - 8.5. We all are included in the character of the fool of the book of Psalms who says "There is no God" (Psalm 53.1) – or might say that there is a God but act as if there was none.
9. So in this same **Sistine Chapel** in which people kept acting blatantly as if "there was no God", an older, mischievous and disenchanted Michelangelo depicts the whole movement of history as revolving on a center
- 9.1. which is not Christ's triumphant power,
  - 9.2. but his mortal wound, God's death, that is the tragic possibility of ignoring God in our lives.
10. The provocative nature of this fresco is hard to miss and has generated endless controversies from the moment it was unveiled – to the point that during the following centuries, successive popes were tempted to erase it.
- 10.1. And, of course, despite the hysteria of puritans of all times, the goading does not lie in the nakedness so profusely on display.
  - 10.2. That nakedness is a diversion.
  - 10.3. What **decency** can seriously be threatened by these oversized torsos with tiny heads, disjointed breasts, bulging love handles, tiny male organs (mostly covered just after Michelangelo's death) – especially when compared to the perfect proportions of Adam's body on the ceiling, right above everyone's head?
  - 10.4. The main problem with people whose entire lives are enslaved to power and money grab is that they lose their sense of humour.
  - 10.5. Otherwise, how could they have missed the **comicality** of the fresco in -just to give few examples-
    - i. the faces of the angels blowing the trumpets,
    - ii. St Bartholomew holding his skin which represents Michelangelo's features,

- iii. the well-known pathetic cowering reprobate man,
- iv. Charon viciously hitting the damned –
- v. not to mention the staged bearing of the beardless Christ.

- 11. We think that we can take the last judgment seriously only if we depict and describe it in grave and stern tones.
- 12. Sometimes, however, especially when dealing with violent paradoxes, a much more apt stylistic device is **farce** - with its ability to express the grotesque absurdity of a situation.
- 13. And indeed, what grander farce than this symbolic hall, which every so many years becomes the world's center stage and in which not just cardinals, but all of us are placed under the huge Damocles' sword of the supreme accountability depicted on its wall, and yet smugly manoeuvre as if it was a fiction, as if "There was no God", as if the wound had indeed killed God and we were the masters of the world.
- 14. We underestimate God's humour – this is why we end up completely missing the real focal point of the fresco, that is the real throbbing heart of history, the locus where God's power really lies.
- 15. We represent him to ourselves as this scowling divinity when in reality he governs history from a wound, an empty cavity – that is from a need, from his hunger and his thirst, under the most improbable disguise:
 

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me". (Mt 25.35-40)
- 16. When Michelangelo has to depict heaven and hell
  - 16.1. He puts the wound of Christ at the center
  - 16.2. In a hidden way
  - 16.3. It is up to us to detect the subscript of the metaphors used by the Gospel
  - 16.4. Decide what is the core message of the Gospel and interpret everything else in Scripture in the light of this core.



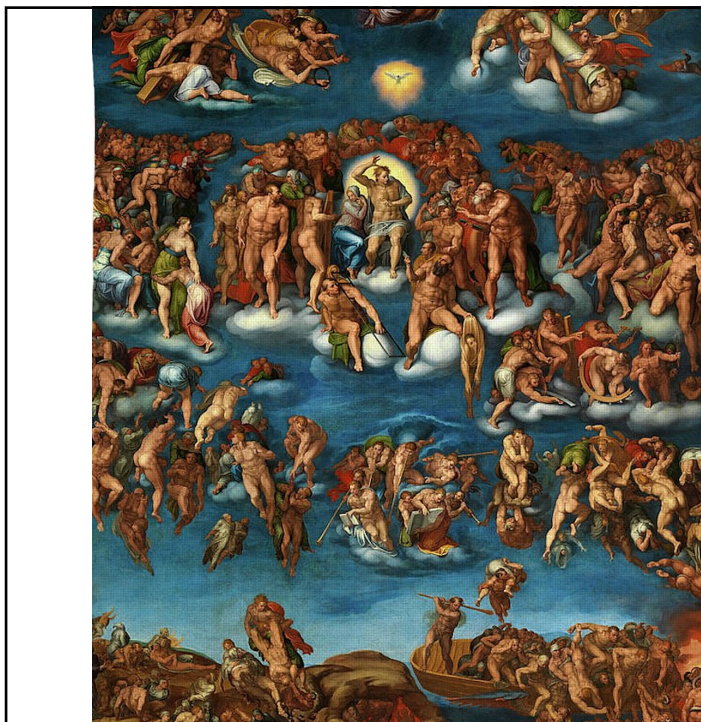




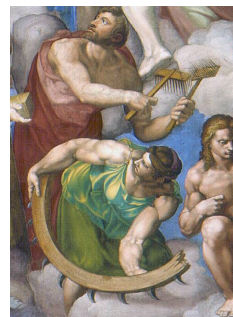


Paul III – Pope  
1534-1549

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Uncensored copy by  
Marcello Venusti



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Luca Signorelli,  
"Last Judgment"  
(1499-1503) Orvieto



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Biagio da Cesena



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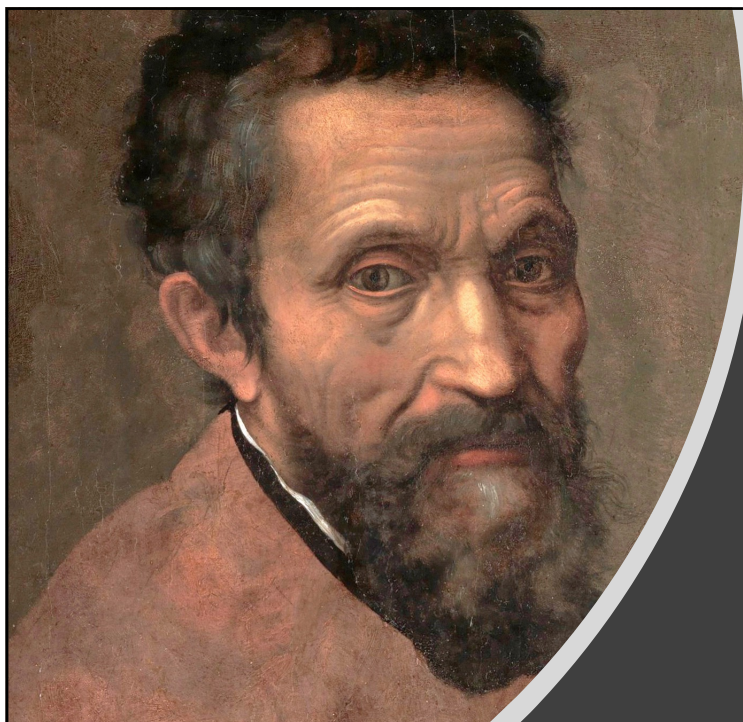
Pietro Aretino  
1492 - 1556

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Michelangelo  
1475-1564

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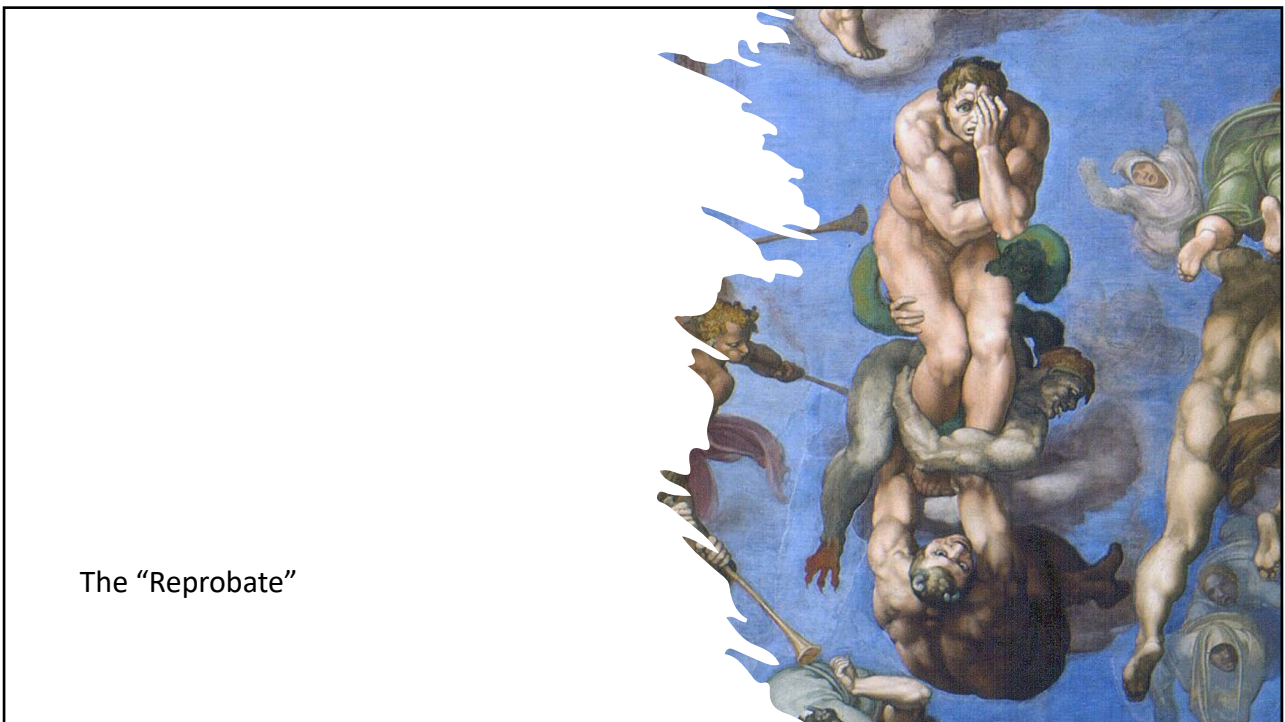
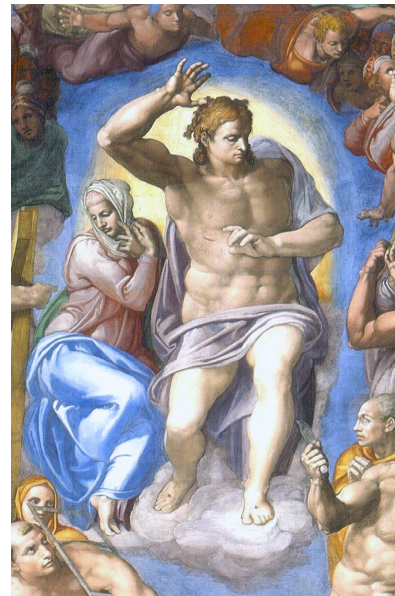


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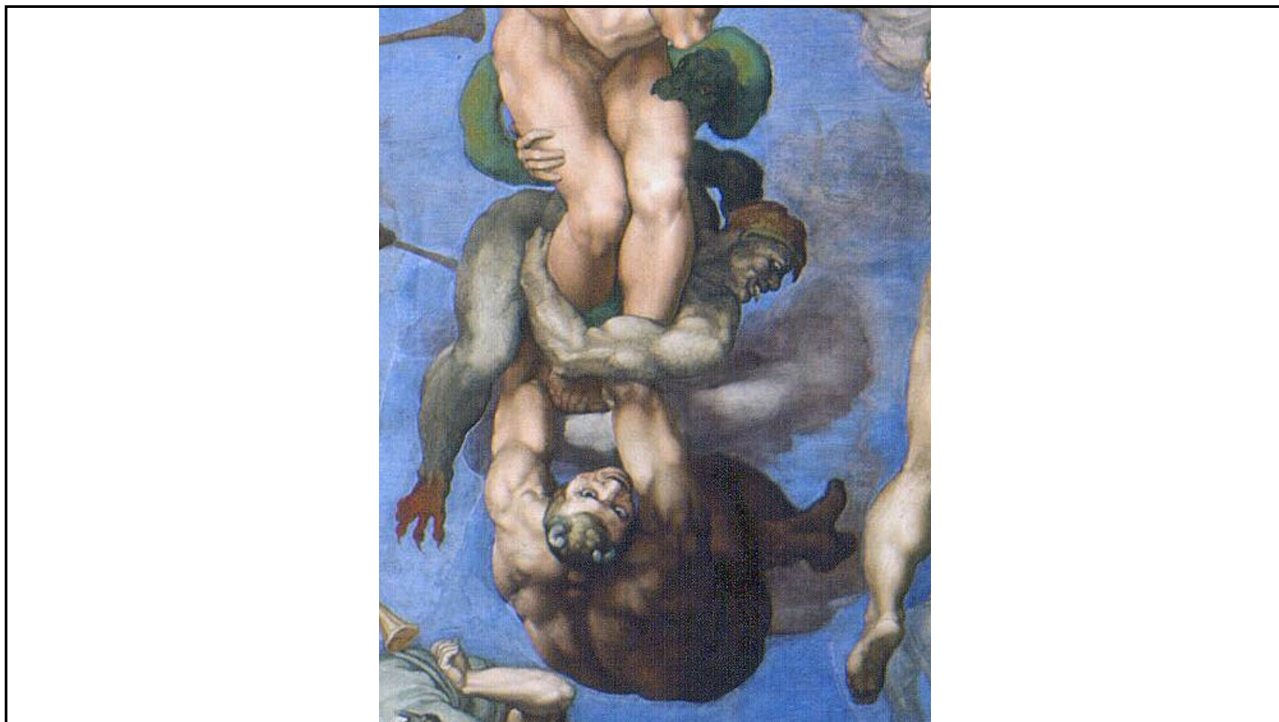




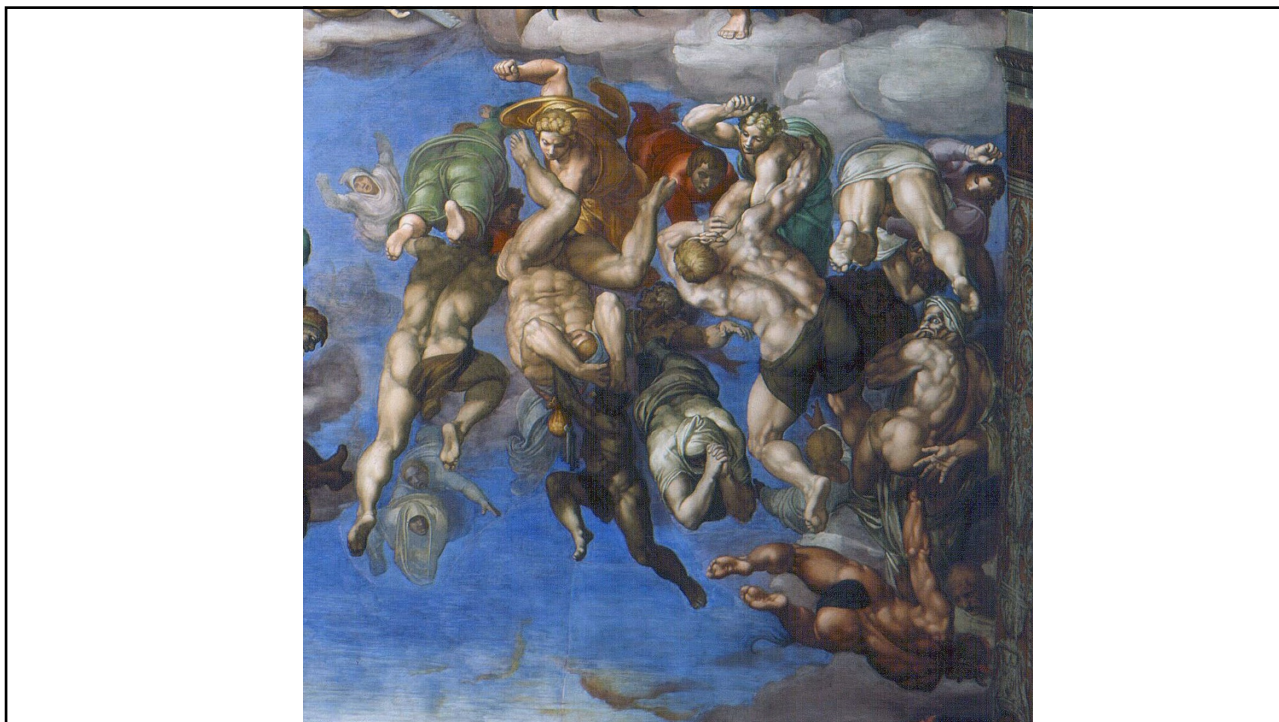
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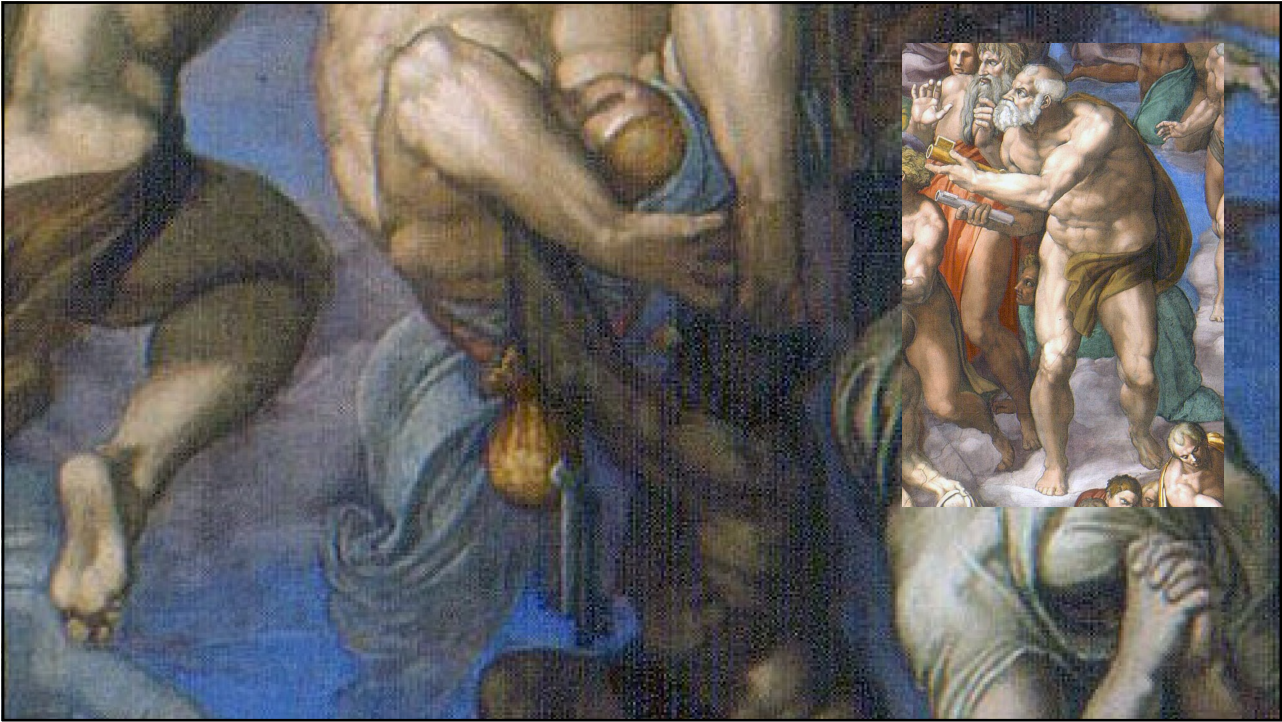


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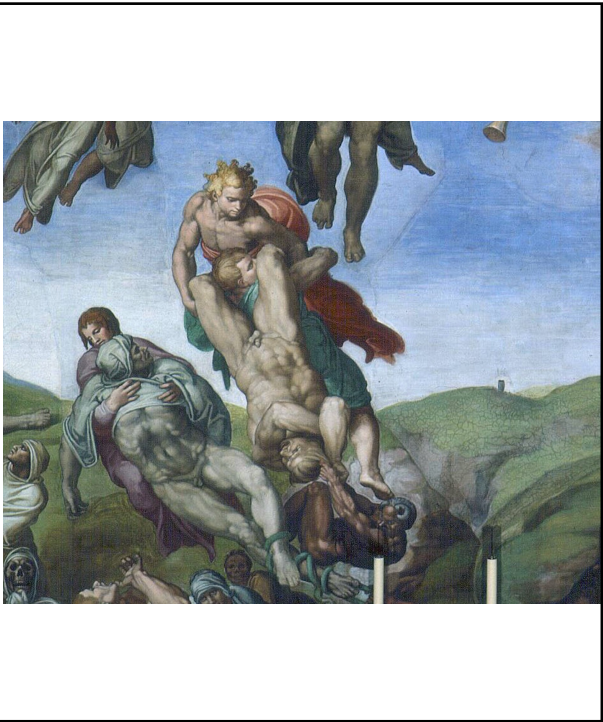




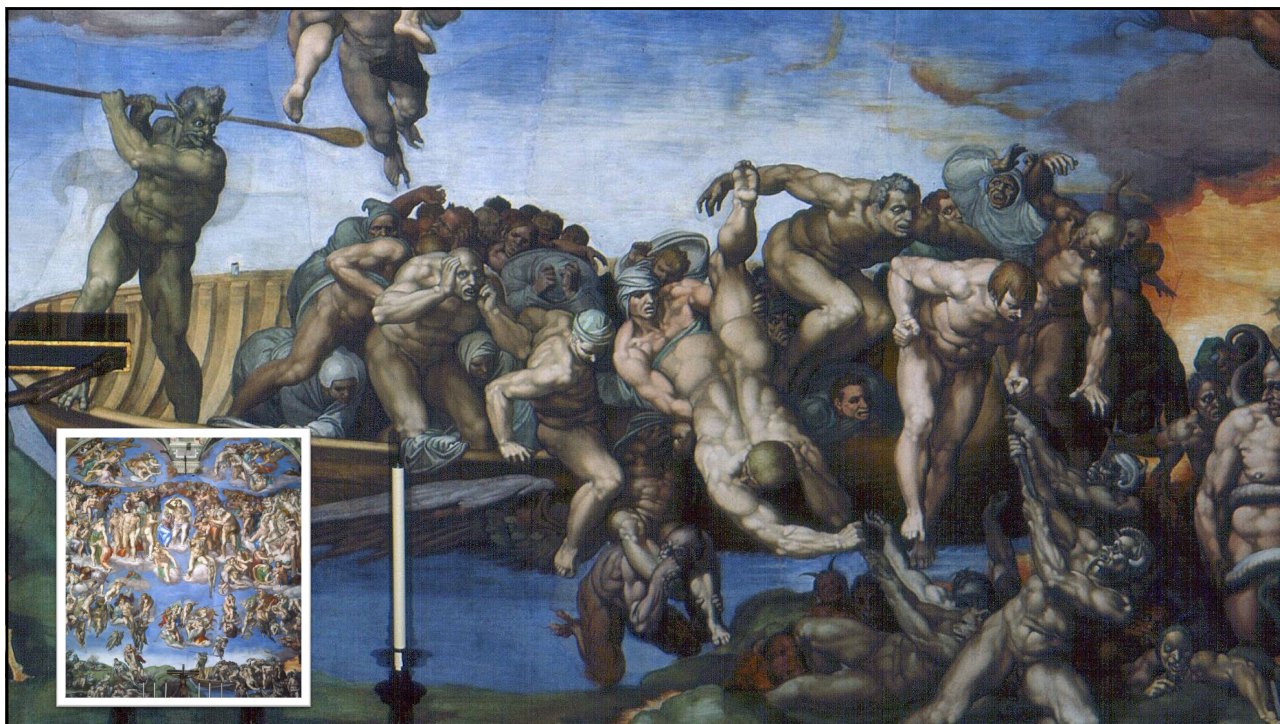
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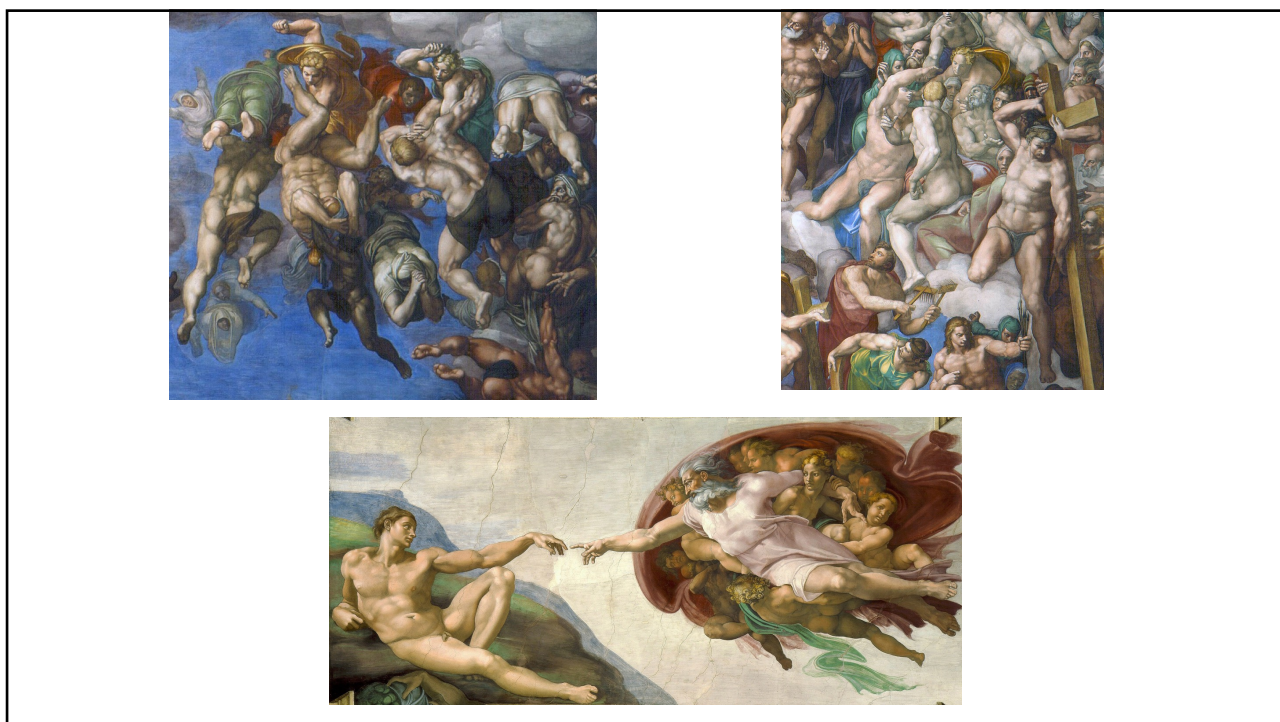
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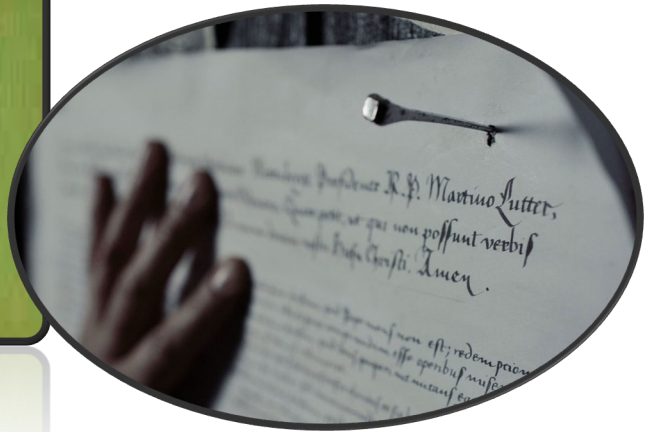


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Martin Luther 1483-1546  
1517 Wittenberg 95 Theses



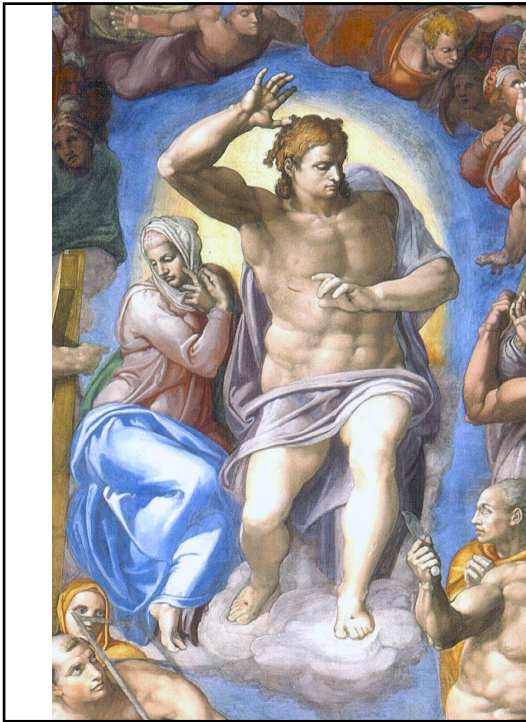
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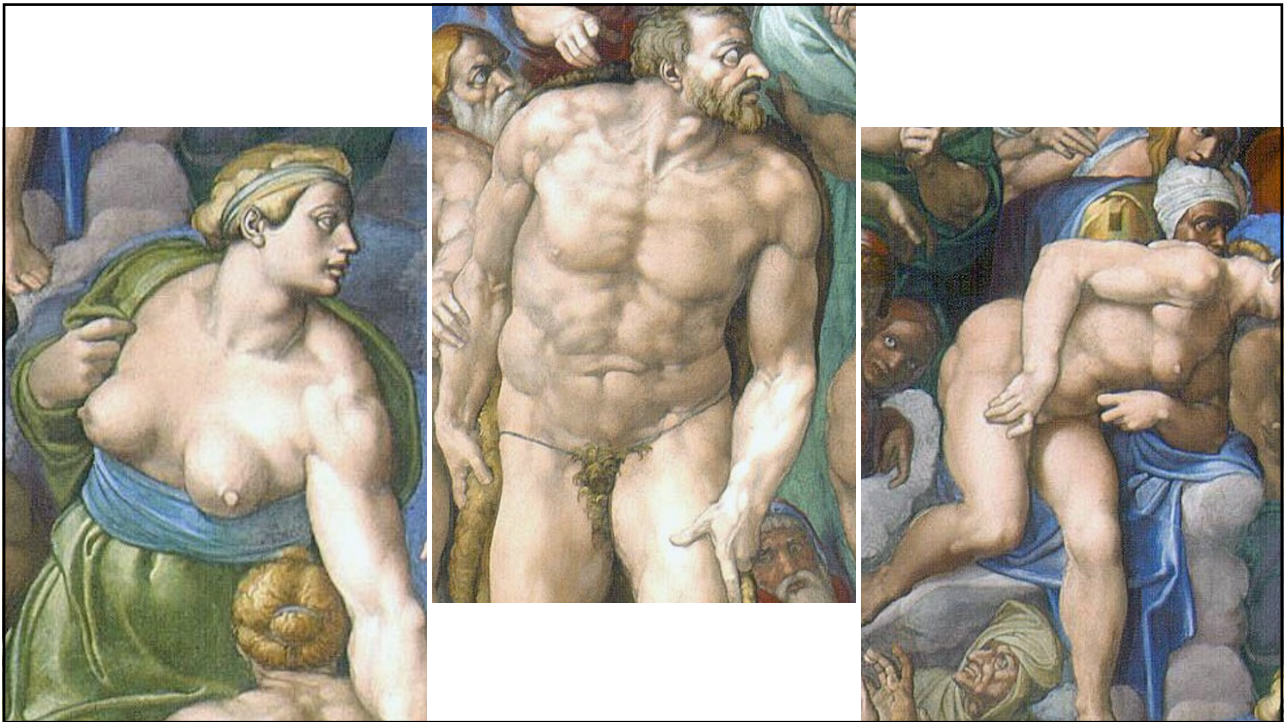


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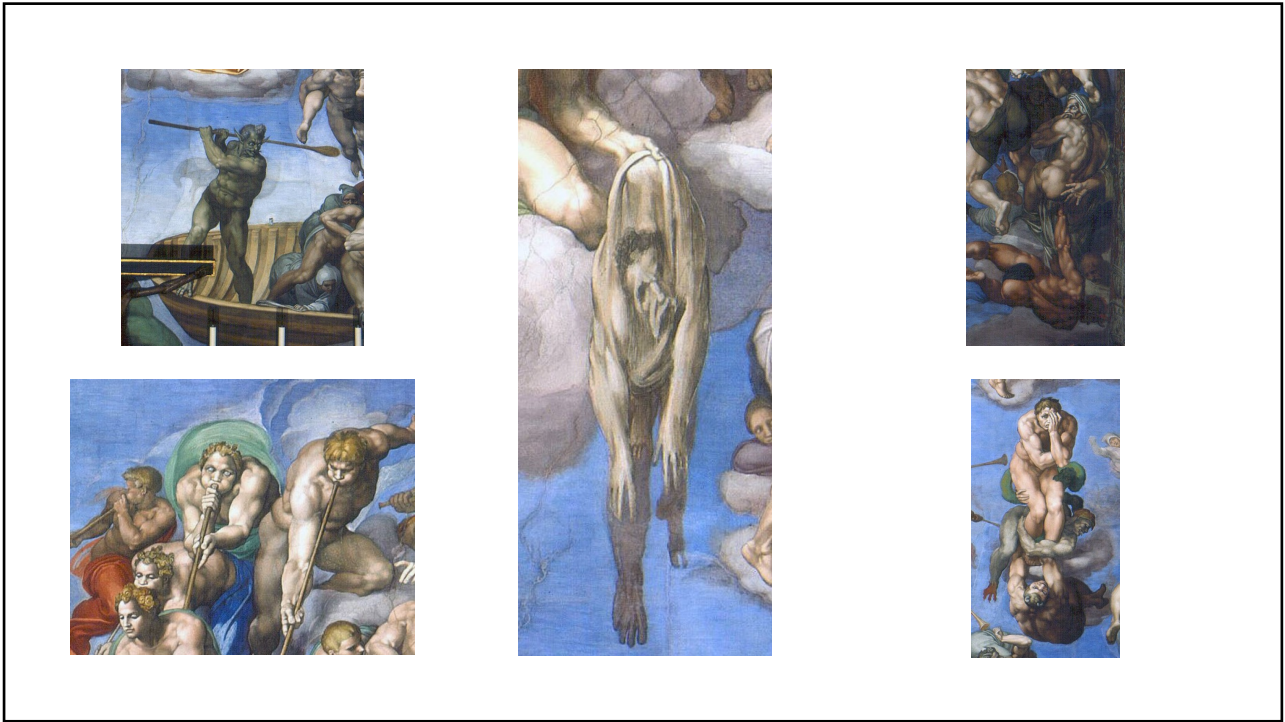


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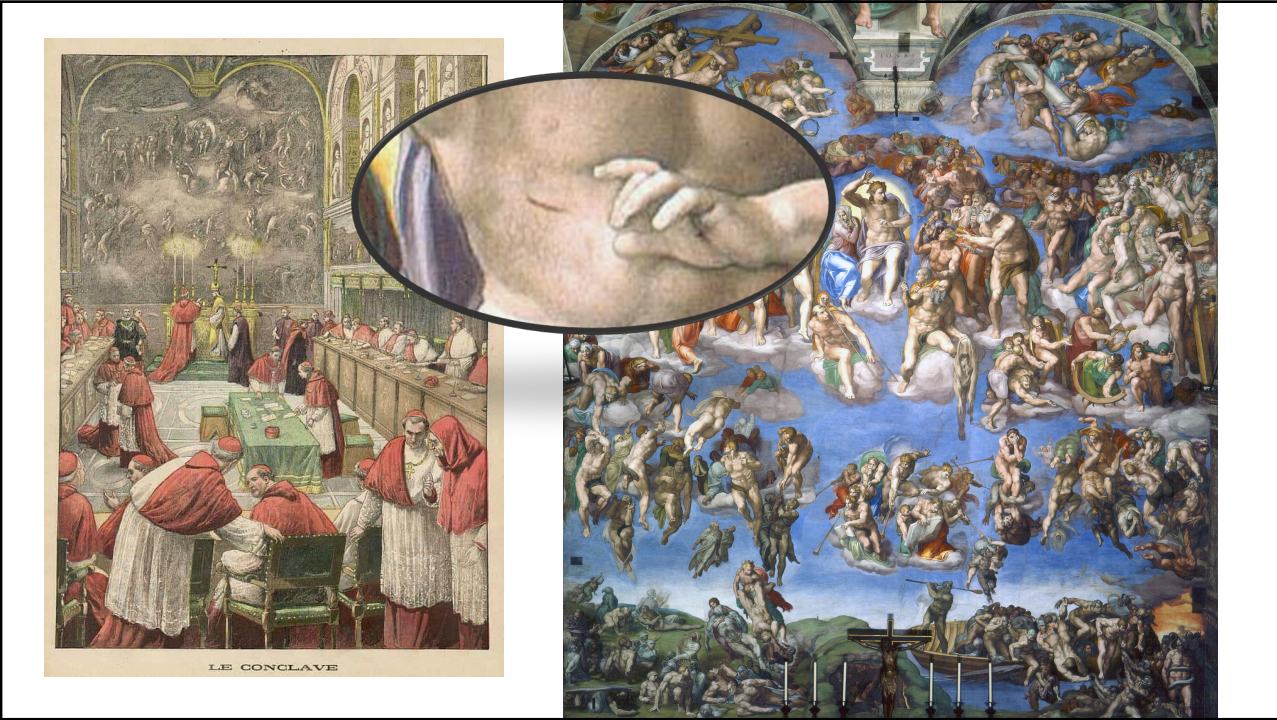


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