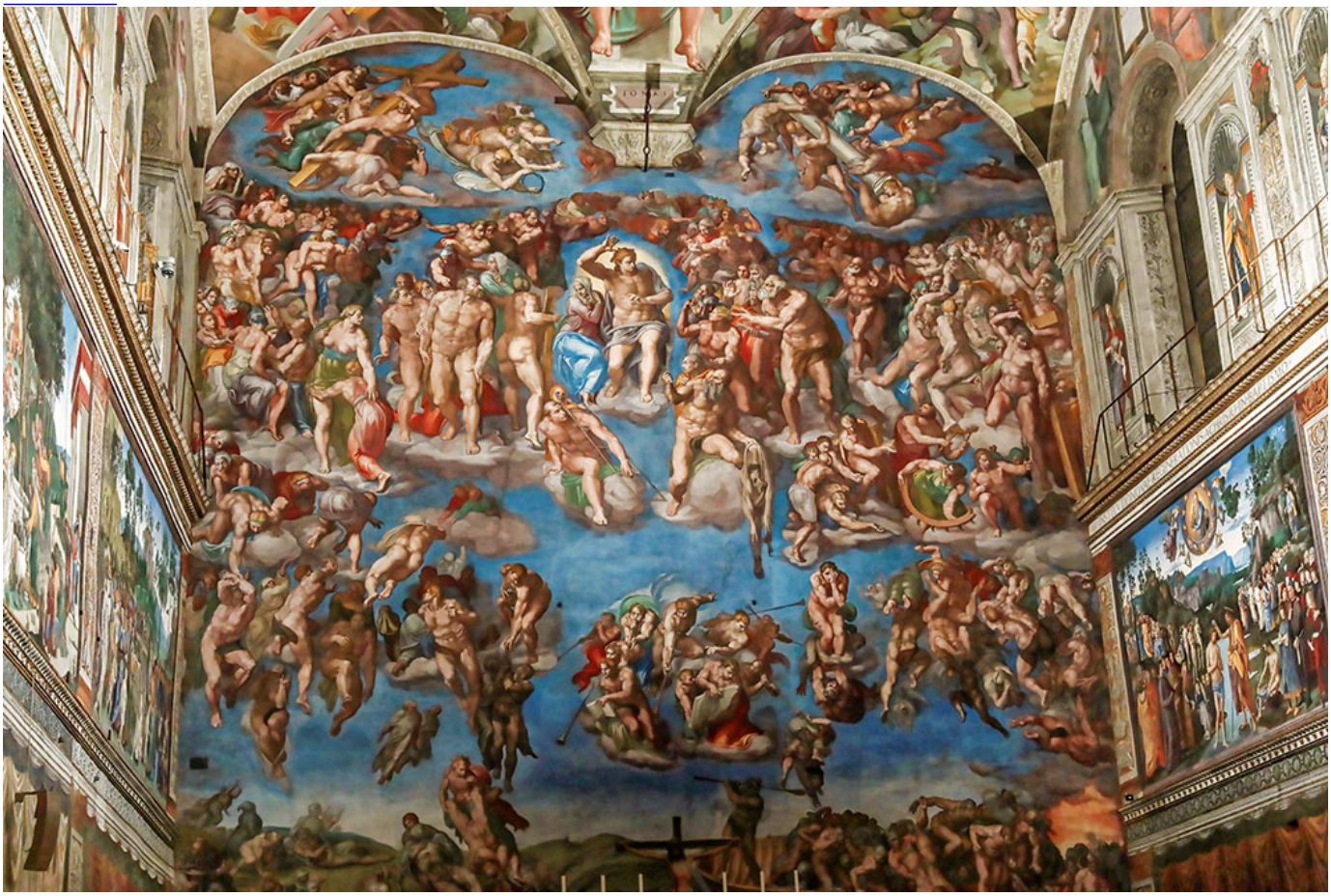
Culture



Michelangelo's 16th-century fresco "The Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican (Wikimedia Commons/Burkhard Mücke)

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Michelangelo's fresco of "The Last Judgment," covering the wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, is being restored. The work, which started on Feb. 1, 2026, is expected to take three months.

The Sistine Chapel is one of the great masterpieces of Renaissance art. As the setting where the College of Cardinals of the Catholic Church meets to elect a new pope, it was decorated by the most prestigious painters of the day. In 1480, Pope Sixtus IV commissioned Domenico Ghirlandaio, Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino and Cosimo Rosselli to paint the walls. On the south are six scenes of the life of Moses, and across on the north are six scenes of the life of Christ.

In 1508, Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling. The theme is the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The images show God creating the world through the story of Noah, who was directed by God to shelter humans and animals on an ark during the great flood. The ceiling's most famous scene may be "God Creating Adam," where Adam reaches out his arm to the outstretched arm of God the Father, but their fingers fail to meet.

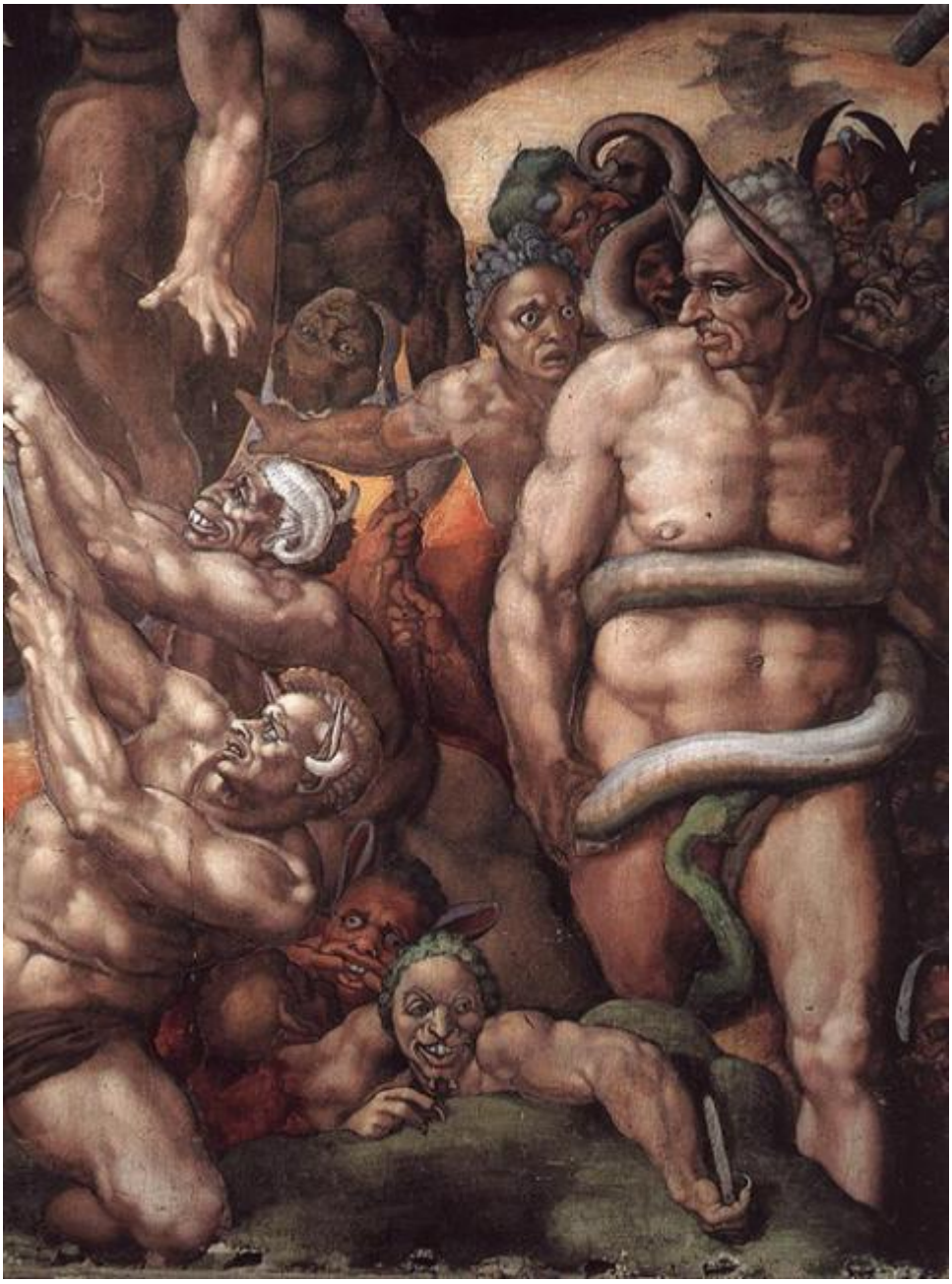
At the sides, the artist juxtaposed the male Hebrew prophets and the female Greek and Roman sybils who were inspired by the gods to foretell the future. It was completed in 1512; then in 1536, Michelangelo was asked to create a painting for the wall behind the altar. For this immense work of 590 square feet, filled with 391 figures, he labored until 1541. He was then nearly 67 years old.

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As an art historian, I have been aware how, from the beginning, Michelangelo's "The Last Judgment" sparked controversy for its bold and heroic portrayal of the male nude.

Many layers of meaning

Michelangelo liked to consider himself primarily a sculptor, expressing himself in variations of the nude male body. Most famous may be the Old Testament figure of David about to slay Goliath, originally made for the Cathedral of Florence.



Group of the damned with Minos, judge of the underworld (Wikimedia Commons)

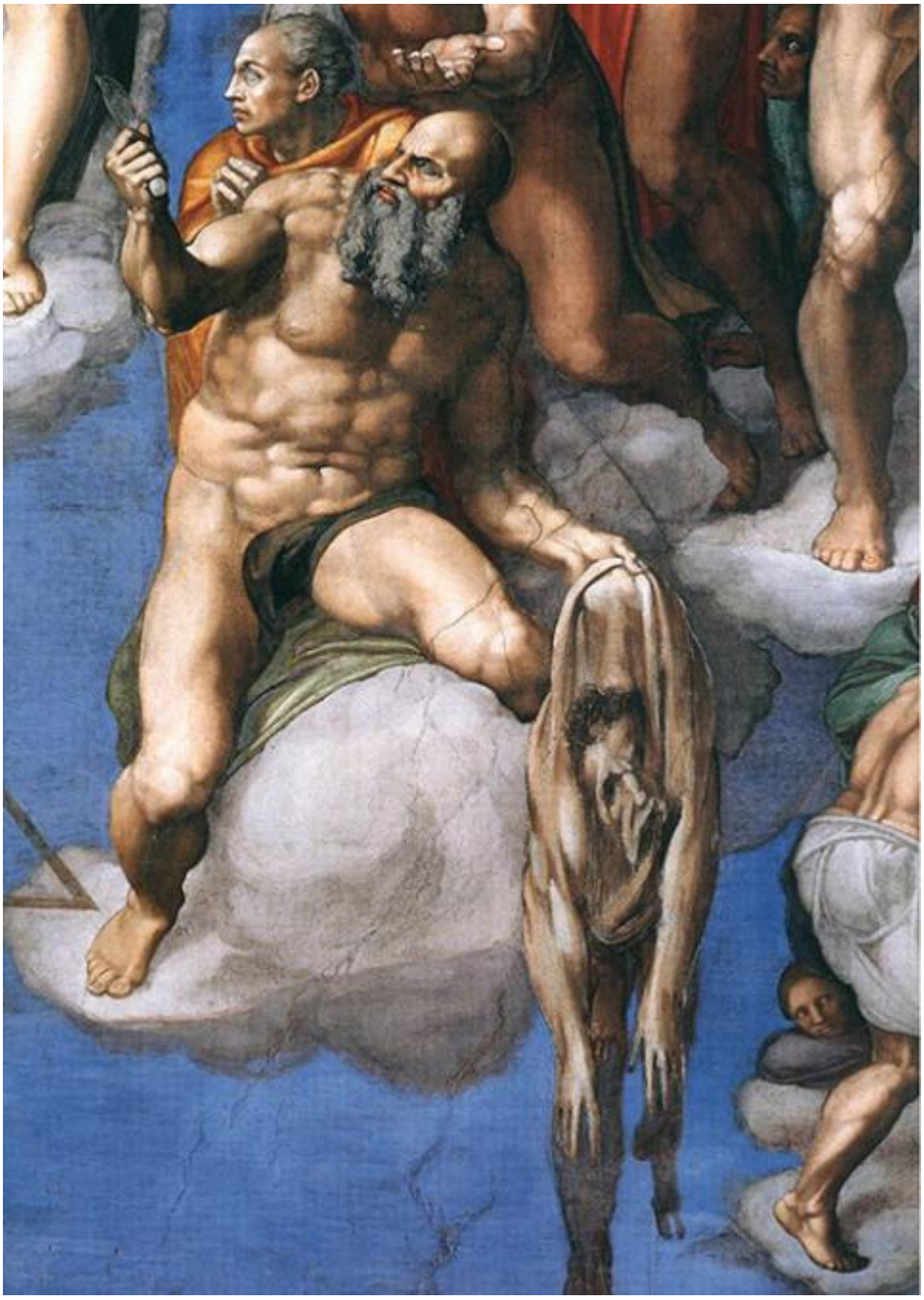
The artist's ceiling for the Sistine Chapel had included 20 nude males as supporting figures above the prophets and sibyls. Originally, Michelangelo's Christ of "The Last Judgment" was entirely nude. A later painter was hired to provide drapery over the loins of Christ and other figures.

"The Last Judgment" scene also contains multiple references to pagan gods and mythology. The image of Christ is inspired by early Christian images showing Christ beardless and youthful, similar to the pagan god of light, Apollo.

At the bottom of the composition is the figure of Charon, a personage from Greek mythology who rowed souls over the river Styx to enter the pagan underworld. Minos, the judge of the underworld, is on the extreme right.

Giorgio Vasari, a fellow artist and historian who knew Michelangelo personally, later recounted the criticism by a senior Vatican official, Biagio da Cesena. The official stated that it was disgraceful that nude figures were exposed so shamefully and that the painting seemed more fit for public baths and taverns.

Michelangelo's response was to place the face of Biagio on Minos, the judge of the underworld, and give him donkey's ears, symbolizing stupidity.



St. Bartholomew holding a knife and his flayed skin (Wikimedia Commons)

Michelangelo included a reference to his own life in a detail connected to the Apostle Bartholomew, who is located to the lower right of Christ. The apostle was believed to have met his martyrdom by being flayed alive. In his right hand, he holds a knife and, in his left, his flayed skin whose face is a distorted portrait of the artist.

Michelangelo thus placed himself among the blessed in heaven, but also made it into a joke.

Thought-provoking imagery

The Last Judgment is a common theme in Christian art. Michelangelo, however, pushes beyond simple illustration to include pagan myths as well as to challenge traditional depiction of a calm, bearded judge. He uses dramatic imagery to provoke deeper thought: After all, how does anyone on earth know what the saints do in heaven?

In these decisions, Michelangelo displayed his sense of self-confidence to introduce new ideas and his goal to engage the viewer in new ways.

A digital reproduction of the painting will be displayed on a screen for visitors to the Sistine Chapel during this period of restoration. Behind the screen, technicians from the Vatican Museums' Restoration Laboratory will work to restore the masterpiece.

Related: Climate change, crowds prompt maintenance on Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment'