

“I am more tired than any man ever was, sick with very great effort; yet I’ve the patience to come to the desired goal” (Baldini and Salvini 197). This is what Michelangelo remarked in 1510, halfway through his work on painting the ceiling of the Sistine Vault. Actually, this remark could have applied to all of the very difficult projects Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to do during the pope’s reign.

In the year 1505 A.D., Pope Julius summoned Michelangelo to Rome, from his hometown of Florence, to begin work on the Pope’s tomb. Michelangelo accepted this assignment, which called for him to carve from marble forty statues of various Biblical figures. The tomb, at the time, was supposed to be thirty-four feet long and twenty-three feet wide, with Michelangelo’s sculptures set into insets lining the walls (Alexander 110-111). Michelangelo received his first payment, bought the marble, and began the long work ahead of him.

When he got back to Florence, he immediately started to work on the tomb, only once again to be called back to Rome “with a rope around my neck” to make a fourteen foot bronze statue of the Pope himself (Alexander 115). Thus, some precious time was lost on the tomb (and three years after he had completed the statue in 1508, the partisans melted it down to make a cannon).

Finally, Michelangelo was able to return to Florence and start on the tomb, or so he thought, because the Pope had other plans for him. Ever since 1506, Julius had been toying with the idea of having the Sistine Chapel replastered, and in 1508, this thought became a reality. This time, though, the Pope wanted Michelangelo to fresco the vault; so once again Michelangelo was asked to stop work on the tomb and start work on

frescoing the Chapel, which was really a huge (one hundred twenty feet in length, forty-five feet in width, and sixty-eight feet in height) vault that had been previously frescoed by Pier Matteo d'Amelia (Schurman 339). Because Michelangelo did not consider himself a painter, he told the pope that "the place is wrong and no painter I" (Baker 68). But when the Pope threatened him with abolishment from Rome, Michelangelo finally consented. Thus he dropped his work on the tomb once again and, with advance payment and a crew of six helpers, began frescoing the vault in 1508 (Canady 74).

During the months that followed, Michelangelo dismissed his helpers because they could not paint to the perfection that he demanded. So, he himself devoted all of his time to the painting of the vault. Since the Pope had given him the freedom to paint whatever he wished on the ceiling of the vault, Michelangelo decided to start over the entranceway with the Flood of Noah and to finish up with scenes from Genesis over the altar wall. He made rough sketches of these designs in red chalk (Baldini and Savini 215). Then, from the drawings, he painted the frescos, most of which were of nudes or of revealingly robed individuals (Rosand 50). All of this he did himself with little or no help. Because he was painting the ceiling of the vault, he had to lie on his back on top of approximately sixty-foot-high scaffolding with his "head turned toward heaven," which, of course, was very uncomfortable (Alexander 116). He even slept many nights upon the scaffolding so as not to have to make the long climb up and down it each day. He continued to paint for two years, after which he took a brief intermission while the scaffolding was taken down and moved to the other half of the vault. As soon as the scaffolding was set up again, he continued to paint for another two years; and when he was finished, he had painted 343 life-sized figures (Schurman 339).

After he finished painting, Michelangelo collected the rest of his payment from the Pope and went back to Florence to continue working on Julius's tomb, which he had never ceased to think about during all the time he spent on the Sistine Vault. This time, though he could not be interrupted again by the Pope, for Julius died, just a year after the vault's completion. This event was very unfortunate for Michelangelo, because the heirs of Julius now started to make the tomb smaller and smaller so as not to have to pay as much for it. They refused to pay Michelangelo for what he had done previously. Forty years later, after many disputes with the heirs of Pope Julius, a now very frustrated Michelangelo gave the heirs only three completed statues: the Moses, the Dying Captive, and the Rebelling Captive (Alexander 117). The Moses became the centerpiece of the tomb. Originally, four centerpiece figures had been planned, but with the reduced size of the tomb because of the squabble with the heirs, only the Moses was completed. The Captives did not fit in with the design of the tomb and were used elsewhere. Two other statues, the Leah and the Rachel, were started by Michelangelo, but completed by other sculptors. St. Matthew, the last of the figures Michelangelo had started to carve, was never finished and is still imprisoned in stone (Buldini and Salvini 119).

Michelangelo continued to create many great works of art until his death at age 89, but he will always be remembered for the magnificent sculptures and paintings that he created for Pope Julius.

### Works Cited

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