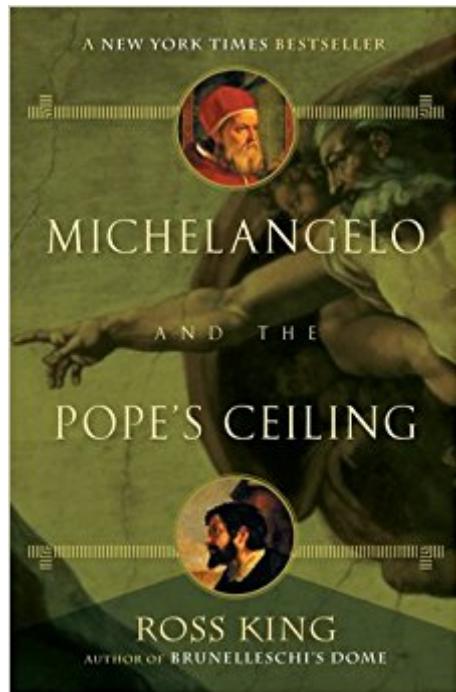


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# Michelangelo And The Pope's Ceiling



## Synopsis

In 1508, despite strong advice to the contrary, the powerful Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the newly restored Sistine Chapel. With little experience as a painter (though famed for his sculpture David), Michelangelo was reluctant to begin the massive project. *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* recounts the four extraordinary years Michelangelo spent laboring over the vast ceiling while the power politics and personal rivalries that abounded in Rome swirled around him. Battling against ill health, financial difficulties, domestic problems, the pope's impatience, and a bitter rivalry with the brilliant young painter Raphael, Michelangelo created scenes so beautiful that they are considered one of the greatest masterpieces of all time. A panorama of illustrious figures converged around the creation of this great work—from the great Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus to the young Martin Luther—and Ross King skillfully weaves them through his compelling historical narrative, offering uncommon insight into the intersection of art and history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Almost 500 years after Michelangelo Buonarroti frescoed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the site still attracts throngs of visitors and is considered one of the artistic masterpieces of the world. *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* unveils the story behind the art's making, a story rife with all the drama of a modern-day soap opera. The temperament of the day was dictated by the politics of the papal court, a corrupt and powerful office steeped in controversy; Pope Julius II even had a nickname, "Il Papa Terrible," to prove it. Along with his violent outbursts and warmongering,

Pope Julius II took upon himself to restore the Sistine Chapel and pretty much intimidated Michelangelo into painting the ceiling even though the artist considered himself primarily a sculptor and was particularly unfamiliar with the temperamental art of fresco. Along with technical difficulties, personality conflicts, and money troubles, Michelangelo was plagued by health problems and competition in the form of the dashing and talented young painter Raphael. Author Ross King offers an in-depth analysis of the complex historical background that led to the magnificence that is the Sistine Chapel ceiling along with detailed discussion of some of the ceiling's panels. King provides fabulous tidbits of information and weaves together a fascinating historical tale. --J.P. Cohen --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

When Pope Julius II saw Michelangelo's Pieta, he determined to have his grand tomb made by the artist. Summoned from Florence to Rome in 1508, Michelangelo found himself on the losing side of a competition between architects and the victim of a plot "to force a hopeless task" upon him-frescoing the vault of the Sistine Chapel. How the sculptor met this painterly challenge is the matter of this popular account, which demythologizes and dramatizes without hectoring or debasing. Forget cinematic images of Charlton Heston flat on his back-Michelangelo's "head tipped back, his body bent like a bow, his beard and paintbrush pointing to heaven, and his face spattered with paint" is excruciating enough to sustain the legend. King (Brunelleschi's Dome) re-creates Michelangelo's day-to-day world: the assistants who worked directly on the Sistine Chapel, the continuing rivalry with Raphael and the figures who had much to do with his world if not his art (da Vinci, Savonarola, Ariosto, Machiavelli, Martin Luther, Erasmus), including the steely Julius II. King makes the familiar fresh, reminding the reader of the "novelty" of Michelangelo's image of God and how "completely unheard of in previous depictions of the ancestors of Christ" was his use of women. Technical matters (making pigments, foreshortening) are lucidly handled. The 16 color and 30 b&w illustrations were not seen by PW, but should add further specifics to a nicely grounded piece of historical dramatization. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Unlike Brunelleschi's Dome which I have found more tedious, I enjoyed this book thoroughly. It is entertaining and very illustrative of the times Michelangelo and all of the Renaissance masters lived. The papal intrigues also come out as a kind of Agatha Christie mystery in a sense. The hardships Michelangelo had to go through in order to achieve the completion of this supreme work sound quite real and it is astounding to learn how he managed to outdo some of the masters of the time when

he was new to fresco. YES, here I learned that believe it or not, this was his FIRST experience with the technique. I considered him a genius in his own right before reading the book, but now my admiration is boundless. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in Renaissance art who is not looking for a scholarly volume but is interested in coming closer to understanding these people's geniuses. I would also recommend reading it BEFORE going to the Vatican in order to be able to know where to look and to appreciate the work to the full without having to listen to parrot like guides. I have bee to the Sistine Chapel twice but I can't wait to go again and check the facts for myself.

The topic of this book is an artistic and historic blockbuster: Michelangelo's famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The author tells the story in great detail -- arguably in too great detail. Every artist and assistant artist and many of their relatives and patrons are given, along with their towns and some of their history -- often with little relevance to the story. This is a lot to wade through and is more than is necessary. Their names are long and hard to pronounce, at least for a non-speaker of Italian. There is a fair amount of repetition as well. For example, we are told at least three times that, contrary to (supposed) popular belief, Michelangelo did not do his painting solo and while lying on his back (as in Irving Stone's "The Agony and the Ecstasy"): He built elaborate scaffolding to make his work and that of his assistants easier. We are told about the sexual reputations of not just Michelangelo (meh) and Raphael (stud), but of many of their friends and associates. This sounds promising but is actually not that explicit and hence a bit disappointing when the book could have used a bit of pizzazz... Arguably, the person who has the most developed and interesting character is not the artist but the man who commissioned him: Pope Julius II -- a domineering and vain and aggressive person, who was perhaps more interested in the power struggles among the Vatican and the Italian city-states (and against France) in the 16th century than in the finer points of the Catholic faith. We never get a definitive idea of how Michelangelo himself felt about Julius -- though it seems negative in balance. We also don't get much info on Michelangelo's attitude toward religion, though it is suggested that he was a believer (with little supporting evidence). Although the book is about Michelangelo as a painter, he considered himself primarily a sculptor (and is perhaps remembered that way). Yet there is not much about his work with stone and its relation to his painting. One of the book's major shortcomings is the lack of good illustrations. There are just a few color plates and not that many black and white ones. I had to go to the Wikipedia entry on the Sistine Chapel to get decent close-ups so I could follow the descriptions in the text. The author should have included at least this link (and probably others that might be

even better). The author's analysis of the frescoes artistic features does not seem authoritative and at times seems sketchy. Of course, to be fair, there are plenty of expert analyses to be had. I had previously read the author's "Brunelleschi's Dome" which is more streamlined and easier to digest. "Pope's ceiling" was, though interesting, rather ponderous. Sometimes less is more as they say.

This is a very good book and I recommend it for people who like history. The story was well researched and brought the iconic sculptor and painter to life while at the same time informing the reader about the conditions and politics of the time as well as debunking generally held myths about his work. I learned much about the lack of ethics of the Popes, and that Michelangelo did not paint the Sistine Chapel while lying on his back. Popes had children and granted favors to them and their families. They also raised armies in order to wage war in addition to patronizing the arts and artists. Michelangelo devised a complicated set of scaffolding which he and his assistants used to fresco the chapel in sections. It took so long that his painting style evolved and changed over the course of the project. There were some black and white pictures in my kindle version of the book, but I had to find color internet photos in order to see the fascinating proof of what the King described in his book. If you love history and character studies, this is the book for you.

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