

LETRAS

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books

MICHELANGELO,
THE BYZANTINES,
AND PLATO

LETRAS

Promovăm autorii români

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The cultural background in which Michelangelo established himself as an artist

In one of my previous books I mention that from the twelfth century Byzantine masters trained peoples to make mosaics in local Venetian workshops.⁵ They did something similar in Florence with respect to painting. As we shall see further, a few researchers are convinced that Byzantine Masters worked in the city as early as the thirteenth century; for instance, this is what Hayden Maginnis believes about Cimabue (1240-1302).⁶ As a student, Michelangelo inevitably saw the works of this artist and those of others. The chapter indicates in some detail how, while living in his native Florence and in Venice, Michelangelo was exposed to works of art either created by artists from Byzantium or under their influence; he visited the latter city twice. Florence was connected to the Mediterranean via River Arno, therefore it was a hub of art circulation. It is likely that artistic pieces that once belonged to Byzantium reached Florence during Michelangelo's life.

The artist was also fortunate to have lived in Florence at a time when Neo-Platonism was at its peak and that fact shaped the mind and the sensibility of this prodigy – especially his philosophy about beauty that transpires particularly in the manner in which he painted the Sistine Chapel, in his poems, and in some of his letters (Johannes Wilde indicates that there exist “500 letters written by him [Michelangelo] and 800 letters addressed to him”).⁷ Among the members of the (Neo)Platonic Academy in Michelangelo's native city were Marsilio Ficino

(1433-1499), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), Agnolo/Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494), and Benedetto Varchi (1503-1565); we shall speak more about some of them later in the book.⁸ They sometimes through direct instruction (as in the case of Poliziano) other times through discussions on various philosophical and artistic topics, shaped the personality and informed the talent of the young sculptor, painter, and later architect. Also the creations of artists as Rafael/Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483-1520), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) stimulated him. His patronage was similarly excellent: Lorenzo de Medici and his family particularly, but also Giovanfrancesco Alvovrandi,⁹ cardinal San Giorgio,¹⁰ and sometimes the popes took good care of the artistic (and not only) necessities of the Florentine remarkable man. Michelangelo lived through the Sees of nine popes, of whom four especially very much demanded his services; these are Julius II (1503-1513); Leo X (1475-1521); Clement VII (1523-1534), and Paul III (1534-1549).¹¹ Important peoples employed him not only in the Italian territories. Among the people who wanted Michelangelo abroad were Francis I (of Valois), King of France (1547-1494; reigned 1515-1547);¹² Sultan Mohammed/Mehmed II (1432-1481; reigned 1444-1446; 1451-1481),¹³ Sultan Suleiman I / Süleyman (1494-1566; reigned 1520-1566);¹⁴ and Emperor Charles V (1500-1558; reigned in various regions of the empire in 1506-1555), as well as the Signoria of Venice¹⁵, and Duke I Cosimo de Medici (1519-1574).¹⁶

The influences on Michelangelo's work

As mentioned in the 'Introduction', whatever remarkable genius he possessed, the extraordinary achievements Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1474-1564)¹⁷ offered to humankind were also the result of hard work. It is also important to emphasize that he came along after a considerable string of talented painters, sculptors, and architects; he is the culmination of a prestigious ancestry. The Oxford art historian Walter Pater flags up that "If one is to distinguish the peculiar savour of his work, Michelangelo must be approached not through his followers, but through his predecessors."¹⁸ Within the book *Michelangelo* authored by Eugène Müntz the first pages indicate the influences that Michelangelo received in his creation; these came, in the author's opinion, from the art of, among others, Cimabue (1240-1302),¹⁹ Giotto (c. 1266-1337),²⁰ Masaccio (1401-14289),²¹ Bertoldo di Giovanni (ca. 1440-1491),²² Donatello²³ (1386-1466), and Andrea del Verrochio (1436-1488).²⁴ Elena Capretti goes as far as to name Bertoldo di Giovanni and Benedetto da Maiano as Michelangelo's "presumed teachers"²⁵ at the Medici's Academy. Müntz opines that Masaccio influenced not only Michelangelo, but also other great painters as Fra Angelico, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Caravaggio, and Ingres; he offered art "far removed from anything Byzantine."²⁶ The same art historian also states that "Responding intensely to Donatello, Giotto, Masaccio, and Signorelli, Michelangelo scrutinized them and copied any gesture, pose, drapery arrangement or facial expression that took his fancy".²⁷ This is a view

that I do not totally share; of course, in his youth the artist studied, as I mentioned, pieces accomplished by these predecessors, but it does not seem that in his *oeuvre* of maturity one can recognise a ‘gesture’ or ‘pose’ from any of the creators in this list. Nevertheless, we continue with Michelangelo’s artistic ‘ancestors’ who had an impact on his work, and mention that the majority of specialists suggest that the Florentine artist learnt from Jacopo della Quercia (1374-1438). This is the case at least with reference to the two statues he made for the cathedral in Bologna: one of St. Petronius and one of a kneeling Angel with a candlestick in his hand.²⁸ (Perhaps the same is true about the statue of St. Proclus that is also to be found in Bologna – a controversy has existed in the scholarship as to whether or not this work was created by Michelangelo²⁹). Gabriele Bartz and Eberhard König assert that “is most likely [for these statues] to have acquired [...] an additional softness, a physicality” [...] through influence from the marvellous reliefs which Jacopo della Quercia (1374-1438) from Siena created for the cathedral façade in Bologna.”³⁰ Also, according to Sydney J. Freedberg, the Creation of Eve on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel reminds the viewer of “Michelangelo’s early study of Jacopo della Quercia; and this reference recalls how Michelangelo’s first formation of a classical style found authority not only in the idealism of antiquity but in that of a style partly medieval, not yet realistic, Quattrocento art. The essentials of actors and accessories to which Michelangelo has confined his narrative are not different than in Jacopo’s version of the scene; the force of Michelangelo’s interpretation is, however, vastly greater.”³¹ Bartz and König opine that there is another influence on Buonarroti’s work: that which originates in Filippo Brunelleschi’s architecture and is perceptible in the embellishment of the new sacristy belonging to San Lorenzo Church (in direct proximity of Medici Palace). The building “was decorated in a Renaissance style, drawing on Michelangelo’s designs, which were in turn based on a

creative interaction with architectural ideas which Filippo Brunelleschi had realized generations earlier in the Pazzi Chapel by Santa Croce.”³²

Pater calls Michelangelo “the last of the Florentines, of those on whom the peculiar sentiment of the Florence of Dante and Giotto descended.”³³ He believes that the most notable manifestation of this state of affairs is the way in which Michelangelo depicted the scene of Creation in the Sistine Chapel: it shows both the artist’s own ‘discipleship’ as well as that of his ‘pupils’ from this particular perspective. These are the artists who painted the above-mentioned iconographic motif again and again. I think that what Pater says is true. But, perhaps paradoxically, the depiction of Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is also particularly the place where “Michelangelo had freed himself from images which were still in many respects rooted in tradition.”³⁴ Despite the fact that the remarkable Florentine did not create a ‘school’ – i.e. not many people have been able to follow his very free style – a few artists tried to copy some of his works: certainly this is the case with respect not only to the scene of *Creation*, but also with that of *The Last Judgement* on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel.³⁵ In our times (i. e. 2014) the entire decoration of this chapel at the Vatican has been reproduced within the Otsuka Museum of Art, but not by a particular artist; a group of people were involved as well, as some modern technology, therefore, this is not a typical discipleship.³⁶

Continuing the discussion about the artistic influences on Michelangelo’s creation, we can indicate that the manner in which he painted some aspects of *The Flood* in the Sistine Chapel has made Bartz and König consider, wrongly in my opinion, that it “reveals training in Netherlandish painting.”³⁷ It is true that Condivi testifies that Michelangelo studied Albrecht Dürer’s work; he certainly knew the treatise *Proportionslehre/Four Books on Human Proportion*³⁸ that came

out shortly after the death of its author in 1528 (Nuremberg), and in a Latin translation in 1532.³⁹ The two artists even visited Venice at the same time (in 1494), a fact that raises the question if they met there; in any case, it was natural for the two artists to know of each other since they were contemporary famous people. But the Florentine did not agree with the theory of proportions Dürer's text contains, hence I do not believe the word 'training' is appropriate here. In my assessment, Michelangelo's work was not influenced by that of Dürer. But, as it is known, he kept himself abreast with the art of his day,⁴⁰ and this is how he discovered Netherland's achievements.

The Dutch painter was known in Italy because he spent sufficient time there to have been able to make an impact. He visited Venice in 1494-1495 (and probably also went to Padua and Mantua during that year).⁴¹ As stated, Michelangelo himself was in the city on the Adriatic shores in 1494, and as much as I would like the two artists to have met, so far there is no evidence in documents about such an encounter. Dürer saw and was impressed by the work of Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516). He also allowed influences from Antonio Pollaiuolo (1429/1433-1498) in his latter drawings and engravings; Pollaiuolo was interested in the proportions of the human body, as Dürer was. Additionally, the Dutch painter was influenced by Lorenzo di Credi (1456/59-1537) and Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506), among others (he copied their works while in Venice). Dürer's second visit to Italy took place in 1505-1507; in 1506 he went to Venice again and took commissions from the German community in that city; he stayed there until the spring of 1507. Initially Dürer produced portraits of the members of that group and a series of works in tempera on linen; all of those strongly showed that he was inspired by Italian art. Then he painted works for churches, notably the *Paumgartner* altarpiece and the *Adoration of the Magi*, and also the altarpiece *Adoration of the Virgin* or the *Feast of Rose Garlands*; this for the church of San Bartolomeo. The latter painting was

subsequently acquired by the Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612; reigned 1576-1612) and taken to Prague. Other paintings Dürer produced in Venice include *The Virgin and Child with the Goldfinch*, *Christ among the Doctors* (supposedly produced in just five days), and a few smaller pieces.⁴²

Going back to Michelangelo, he also knew the Flemish art of his time and appreciated it. Works by representatives of the Northern European School where it was produced had an impact on Florence's artistic life in the fifteenth century and, unsurprisingly, this great local artist wanted to see those. Müntz indicates that the statue *Madonna and Child* ('Madonna of Bruges') was commissioned by Flemish merchants.⁴³ Concerning the same work, Bartz and König comments that "Perhaps the Bruge *Madonna*, which he [Michelangelo] sold to the heirs of Moscheroni or Mouscron and which today stands in the Mouscron Chapel of the Church of Notre Dame in Bruge [...], was once intended for Siena, where the Piccolomini altar is decorated today with an older statue of the Virgin from the group around Jacopo della Quercia."⁴⁴ Loren W. Partridge considers another influence and points out to "a suggestion that the most unusual posture of Adam [in the Sistine Chapel] was based on a Greco-Roman relief of Hercules in the company of one of the Hesperides plucking an apple from their three, known from a drawing by the artist and antiquarian Pirro Ligorio (c. 1500-1583)."⁴⁵

In his book *The Sistine Chapel. Paradise in Rome*, Ulrich Pfisterer affirms the reality of some of those influences and indicates others he considers to be discernible in Michelangelo's work. This is what he states: "In the past, early Christian and medieval wall paintings in Roman basilicas, especially those in Old Saint Peter's and Saint Paul's, were mentioned as models for Michelangelo. For instance, in the array of images in the two basilicas – known to us today only through drawings – the scene of the creation of Adam and Eve and the division of light

between sun and moon occupied prominent places. Closer in time to Michelangelo were Lorenzo Ghiberti's so-called *Gates of Paradise* for the Florentine baptistery (so-named presumably by Michelangelo because of their beauty but also because, as a site of baptism, every baptistery opens the path to heaven), Jacobo della Quercia's marble reliefs on the main portal of San Petronio in Bologna, and the prophets and sibyls on the bronze tomb of Sixtus IV. For the obscure Bible scenes in the bronze medallions, Michelangelo consulted the woodcuts in an Italian Bible first published in Venice in 1490, named the Malermi Bible after its translator. Other figures – especially the *ignudi* – are responses to ancient statuary such as Belvedere Torso.⁴⁶ Even during Michelangelo's life some resemblance with other works was flagged out. In the 1960's, Sven Sandström commented on what he considered to be the probable connection between the embellishment of the ceiling within the Sistine Chapel and that of the ceiling of S. Maria del Popolo church in Rome, and also that within the Collegio del Cambio in Perugia. However, the comparison he makes does not take into account the final painting in the Sistine Chapel; it only considers that intended by the first drawing which was concerned with the decoration of the monument. As we know, that was later modified; the initial version is in the British Museum.

Here is what Sandström affirms:

The distinction between large figure-painting and decorative frieze is an important one. The date of the painting of the choir vault in S. Maria del Popolo cannot be determined with certainty, though some evidence points to the period September 1508 to May 1509. The fact that Michelangelo's drawing bears such essential affinities with the choir vault, despite the fact that there is not a single detail in this latter that needs to be accounted for by reference to the sketches or finished works of Michelangelo, makes it extremely probable that Pintoricchio had at least completed his sketches at a time when Michelangelo was starting work on his own.

Even if Michelangelo derived from Pintoricchio's vault the distinction between the false plastic thrones with their figures, the actual forms adumbrated in the vault panel itself show kinship not with those of Pintoricchio, but rather with those of Perugino in the Collegio del Cambio. All the evidence points to the assumption that it was Michelangelo's intention that the frames with their different shapes should appear to be laid upon the wall of the vault without forming an architectonic structure, that they should decorate the vault wall just as the medallions had done on Perugino's wall. The fact that the circular medallion form already occurs in this first sketch leads one to surmise that, like Perugino, Michelangelo intended to make polychromatic pictures alternate with false reliefs of the medallion or cameo type.⁴⁷

It is good that Sandström is cautious and uses the word "probable" because, even after seeing images from the ceiling of the three shrines, I still do not think that Michelangelo copied within the Sistine Chapel motifs either from S. Maria del Popolo or from the Collegio del Cambio (if some similarity exists that was not intentional). The artist certainly saw the former buildings, as he saw many others, but not copied anything in particular from their wall-paintings; in his first sketch of the chapel in the Vatican he rather made an attempt to figure out a ceiling decoration based on elements that were used in similar circumstances in his day. Also we have to keep in mind that the first drawing of the Vatican chapel was very much discussed with Michelangelo's patron and those around him. Among the most recent authors who remind us about such a supposition is Capretti. This is what she affirms: "The most likely hypothesis is that Michelangelo collaborated with the learned theologians of the papal court who would have suggested themes and ideas that the artist then developed in his own style."⁴⁸ But in the final version of Michelangelo's work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel the artist expresses maximum freedom.