

CHAPTER V

MICHAEL ANGELO AS PAINTER

GREAT and glorious as was Michael Angelo as a sculptor, he only holds a secondary place as a painter. But we must distinguish between the work of an artist such as Buonarroti, and that of colourists like Giorgione, Titian, Rembrandt, or Rubens. As a sculptor, Michael Angelo did work which has never been equalled; but as a colourist he was lacking in strength. He could only paint the human form in all its naked splendour, and never helped his figures with wealth of colour, with backgrounds of landscape or architecture, or accessories of dress or ornament. One has but to look at the roof of the Sistine Chapel to see what was his conception of the highest form of painting.

As a painter of the human form—purely idealistic—Michael Angelo has never been surpassed, and seldom approached. His brushwork approaches in sublimity that of his chisel; and he may be said to have painted with his chisel and to have carved with his brush. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, as a painting, is the greatest masterpiece that the hand of man has carried out, yet the genius who designed that stupendous creation was not a good colourist.

No Italian painter had ventured to present the nude until Signorelli painted his great frescoes in the Cathedral



Hanfstängl photo

[National Gallery, London

MADONNA AND INFANT CHRIST, ST. JOHN

THE BAPTIST AND ANGELS

ATTRIBUTED TO MICHAEL ANGELO

at Orvieto, with astonishing excellence. But fine as they are, they cannot be compared with the great design of Buonarroti in the Vatican, which owes nothing to colour. Indeed, if all the colour were to fade and disappear, the frescoes in the Sistine would, in mere black and white, remain the wonder and despair of artists.

We know of only four authentic paintings in oil by Buonarroti, and of these, two are in our own National Gallery in London.

It was not until the exhibition of paintings from the private collections in England, held at Manchester in 1857—an exhibition which revealed a quantity of artistic treasures that had been buried in country houses—that the Michael Angelo *Madonna*, now one of the most precious possessions of the National collection, was discovered to be the work of that master. It then belonged to Henry Labouchere, Lord Taunton, and had always been ascribed to Ghirlandajo, but it was probably painted by Buonarroti whilst studying under that artist: owing to its becoming known to the art world at this exhibition, it was called the Manchester *Madonna*.

The *Madonna* is more feminine in type than is usually the case with Michael Angelo; angels stand by her side, and the infant Christ and St. John are very sweet and childlike. The colouring is the least happy note, but as the painting is unfinished it cannot be judged as if it were a complete work. Some critics will not allow that this *Madonna* is a genuine work by Buonarroti. On the other hand, some of the ablest judges of the work of the master are convinced of its genuineness, and amongst others such authorities as Mr. Muntz, Herr Richter, and Signor Frizzoni.

The *Entombment* was in Cardinal Fesch's collection in Rome—a huge gathering of paintings, in which amongst a great deal of rubbish were some pearls. After the death of the Cardinal this particular painting was bought by a Mr. Macpherson, and became the property of the National Gallery in 1868, £2,000 being paid for it. If by any chance the picture could come into the market again, twenty times that sum would willingly be given for it.

Like the Manchester *Madonna*, the *Entombment* is unfinished. This work is more painful than impressive, and although the dead Christ is superb in drawing and foreshortening, the attendant figures are almost grotesque. Of the figure of Christ, Ruskin writes: "The dead Christ was thought of only as an available subject for the display of anatomy." The colouring is both crude and inharmonious. As with the *Madonna*, critics have disputed over the genuineness of this painting, and much as one rejoices at the presence of the first among the pictures of the nation, one would, I think, not much regret to part with the second.

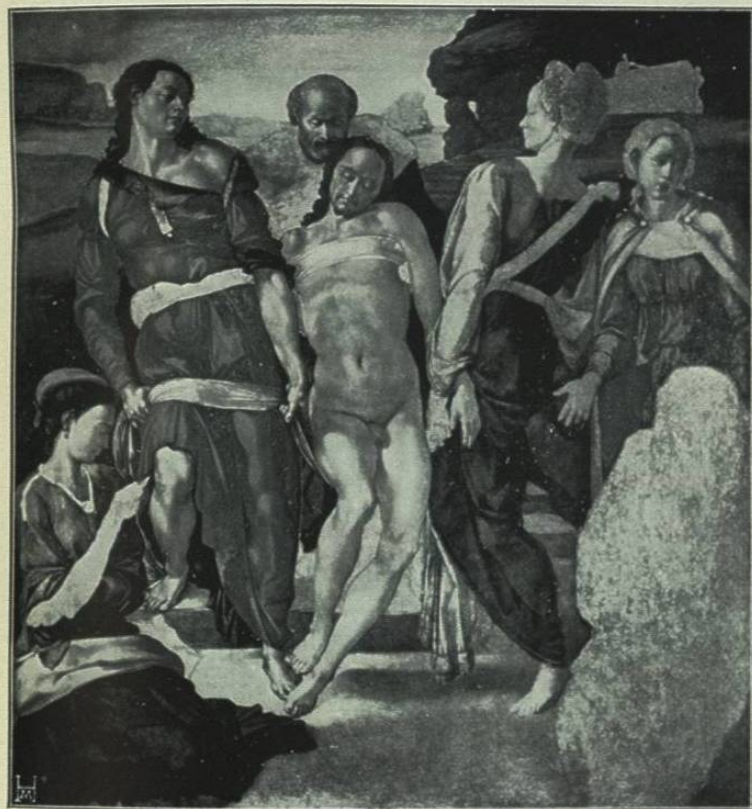
No shadow of doubt attaches to the genuineness of the Doni *Madonna* in the Tribune of the Uffizi Gallery at Florence, and it is the only completed oil painting by Michael Angelo known. Although the modelling and draperies in this work are superb, it does not please as a whole. It might even be said that it is the most unsatisfactory portrayal of the Holy Family that any great artist has produced. Even the greatest talent has its limitations, and Buonarroti had his as a painter in oil. And he himself was conscious of this limitation for he declared that oil painting was not his vocation.



Uffizi Gallery, Florence

THE "DONI" HOLY FAMILY

Anderson photo



Hanfstaengl photo

[National Gallery, London]

THE ENTOMBMENT OF OUR LORD
ATTRIBUTED TO MICHAEL ANGELO

The master's great cartoon of the Florentine soldiers surprised whilst bathing in the Arno by the enemy was probably painted in distemper. This also was left unfinished. Vasari says that whilst he was working upon this fresco Michael Angelo allowed no one to enter his studio. Some of his sketches for this cartoon are still in existence, those in Vienna being the most finished: they are considered by Muntz as Buonarroti's first draught of his idea. At Oxford there is a drawing of some mounted soldiers which may have formed part of the original design, and in the Accademia at Venice there is a drawing of two figures which also belonged to this cartoon.

Vasari waxes very eloquent over the "lost cartoon": "Of a truth," he writes, "the artists were struck with amazement, perceiving, as they did, that the Master had in that cartoon laid open to them the very highest resources of art; nay, there are some who still declare that they have never seen anything equal to that work, either from his own hand or that of any other, and they do not believe that the genius of any other man will ever more attain to such perfection." Spenser writes:

"Of all God's works, which do this world adorn,
There is no one more fair and excellent
Than is man's body both for power and form,
While it is kept in sober government."

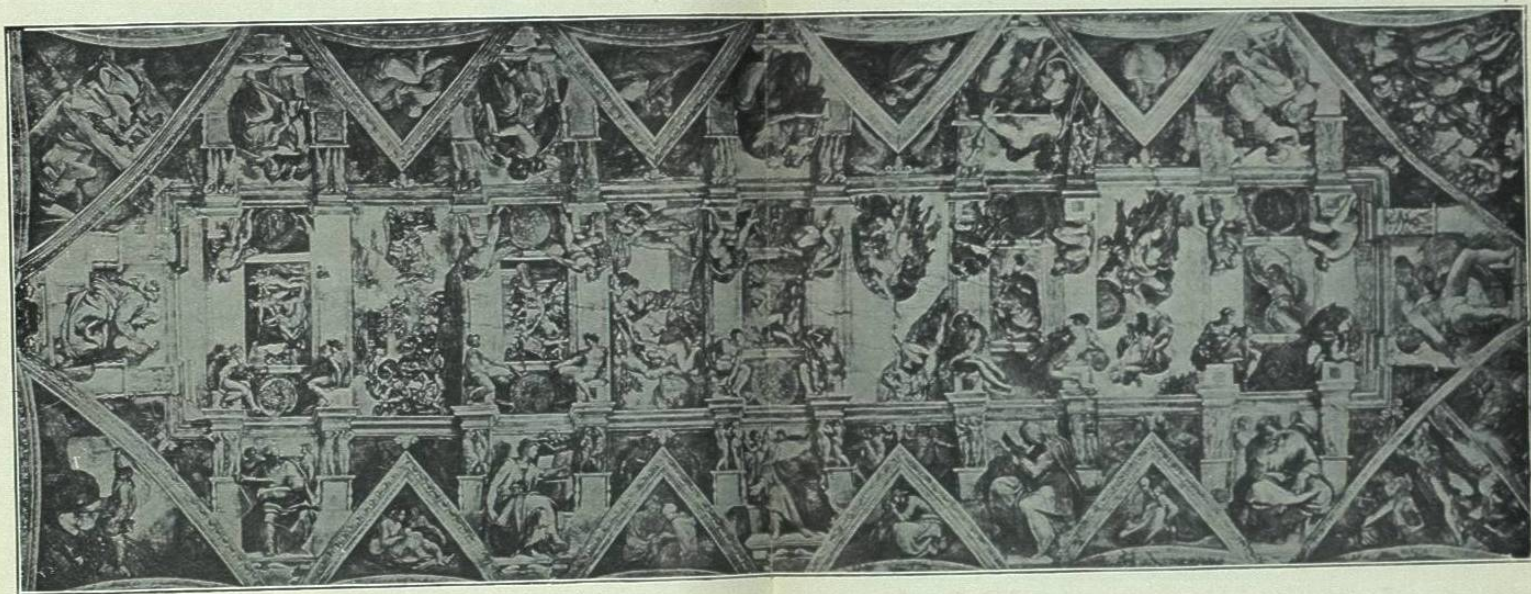
And Michael Angelo amongst all artists was supreme in depicting "man's body" both in painting and sculpture, but nowhere was he so supreme as in his frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. That chapel roof is 130 feet in length and 43 feet wide. On this space Buonarroti had a field, worthy his genius, to cover with the marvels of his brush. Although at first unwilling to paint in fresco,



never having painted in that vehicle, he soon appears to have thrown himself with all his "artistic fury," as Vasari calls his fashion of attacking a block of marble, into the task.

To those who express a sense of disappointment on seeing this ceiling, one can only say that much study and not a little artistic knowledge are necessary to its proper appreciation. And it is not given to many to comprehend worthily, even in the smallest degree, the magnificence, the might, majesty, and genius of that fresco. Let it also be remembered that this work has been the wonder and the admiration of all those who, during the past four centuries, have been most capable of feeling the splendour of the painting, that it was this fresco that made Raphael thank God that he lived in the days of Michael Angelo, and caused Sir Joshua Reynolds to write: "To kiss the hem of his (Michael Angelo's) garment, to catch the slightest of his perfections, would be a glory and a distinction enough for an ordinary man." When also it is remembered that on this ceiling there are 343 figures, many of heroic proportions, some idea of the gigantic scheme of this work may be realized.

Seen from the floor of the chapel it is difficult to grasp the perspective of these huge figures, the seated prophets and sibyls—which, if they could rise from their seats, would tower eighteen feet in the air, sublime giants and giantesses. Each one of these hundreds of figures was first drawn by Michael Angelo in outline on the plaster of the roof. In some cases, notably in the groups of children on the piers of the windows, no outline appears, a single perpendicular line being all that the artist had to guide him while painting the figures on the wet plaster,



Alinari photo

CEILING OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL

which was composed partly of Roman lime and partly of marble dust, highly polished, and every morning Buonarroto would lay on fresh plaster before commencing work. It is astonishing, considering that nearly four centuries have elapsed, how freshly the colour remains upon this fresco. The blues, it is true, have faded out of the sky and the draperies, but the remaining colours are little altered. There are cracks and small fissures here and there on the painting, but these have probably been caused by earthquake shocks. Considerable harm has also been caused by the smoke of candles and incense burnt below in the chapel, but we must be grateful that the ages have on the whole been so merciful to this great work.

The central portion of the ceiling is divided into nine panels containing the following subjects, four of which are large, and five are small.

1. *The Almighty dividing Light from Darkness.*
2. *The Almighty creating the great Luminaries.*
3. *The Almighty blessing the Earth.*
4. *The Creation of Adam.*
5. *The Creation of Eve.*
6. *The Temptation and the Fall.*
7. *Noah's Sacrifice.*
8. *The Deluge.*
9. *Noah's Drunkenness.*

The finest of these panels is that showing the *Creation of Adam*. In the first three panels the subjects are such that even Buonarroto could not succeed, and the Almighty, figuring as a venerable patriarch, white bearded, floating in ether and gesticulating violently as He hovers round a huge terrestrial ball, only shows how inadequate even

the genius of Michael Angelo was to picture such an unpaintable subject. In the *Creation of Adam*, however, we have one of the noblest representations of humanity that any age has bequeathed to the world. Adam is just roused into life, and Michael Angelo has, I think, intended to represent the instant when the life of the spirit is first breathed into him by the Almighty, who touches the outstretched finger of the creature formed in His likeness; in another instant one expects to see Adam, still in superb inertness, rise, not only endowed with a form like a god, but with intelligence and mental power. In this panel the wingless angels, who support the Creator as He floats towards the newly-created Adam, are of the greatest beauty.

In the next panel Adam is shown sleeping, with the newly-created Eve turning from him to the Almighty. And again, in those of the *Temptation and the Fall* of our first parents, Michael Angelo has given us his finest conception of a woman; not the heavy-limbed, weary-eyed type that rests on the tomb of the Medici, but woman in all her grace, in all her beauty of form and feature.

The smaller panel, representing *The Deluge*, has suffered much from smoke. This is one of the painter's earliest panels, and finding the figures in it too small when seen from below, he enlarged them to the scale of the others. Despite the smoke-stains it can be seen how well the figures of hurrying people, flying in all haste to reach the hills, are portrayed. *Noah's Drunkenness* is a subject that does not lend itself to art, but Michael Angelo has treated the lapse of the patriarch soberly and modestly.

The nine panels are connected by painted architectural frames and at each corner of these frames is a figure of



Anderson photo]

[Sistine Chapel, Rome

THE ERYTHREAN SIBYL