



April 1st 2011

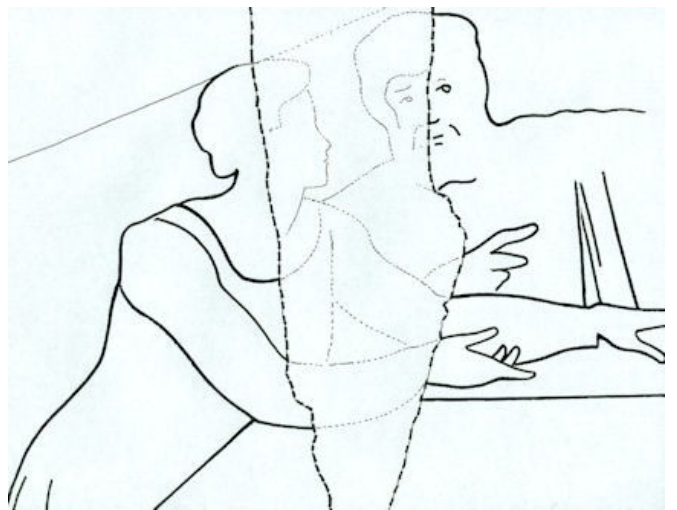
Misreading Visual Evidence ~ No 2: Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Ceiling

No single proof of a restoration-induced injury to a work of art could be clearer than the photograph shown here (Fig. 1) of a section of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes. It was taken after the last restoration and shows in its centre section a repair made in 1566 by the painter Domenico Carnevale when a section of Michelangelo's fresco fell away during settlement of the building (see Fig. 2 diagram). Carnevale had re-plastered the loss and, while the plaster surface was still wet, faithfully painted it to match Michelangelo's (then) surrounding colours and tones. The repair was a good one and for centuries it remained almost invisible (see Figs. 4, 5 & 6). Ever since the last restoration it has been glaringly evident that Carnevale's painted section no longer matches what has survived of Michelangelo's painting (see Fig. 7). As will be shown, on the evidence of these photographs, fair estimation can be made of the injuries inflicted upon Michelangelo's frescoes during restoration.

The reason why the photographs testify to restoration injury is simple and elegant. Carnevale's repair was made a fresco in "good" or buon fresco, which is to say, solely with pigments that were painted onto the still-wet plaster and, crucially, without any later additional painting on the surface of the fresco after it had dried. With this method, Carnevale matched the pictorial values of Michelangelo's frescoes as they were then found, only half of a century after their completion. However, unlike Carnevale's painting, where the pigments were locked into the lime plaster when it dried, Michelangelo's own frescoes were completed a secco - that is to say, with much additional glue or size-based painting applied to the surface of the frescoes after they had dried. Against great evidence (see below), the Vatican's restorers concluded that Michelangelo had painted entirely in buon fresco without a secco additions and, on that (unsound) decision, they contended that it would be perfectly safe to apply a recently developed oven cleaner-like thixotropic cocktail of cleaning agents (in two applications of three



Above, Fig. 1: a detail from one of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel pendentives, "The Punishment of Haman", containing, in its centre section, a repair made by the painter Domenico Carnevale in 1566.



Above, Fig. 2: a diagram in which the parts of the figures of Esther and the king Ahasuerus that were repainted by Domenico Carnevale in 1566 are indicated by dotted lines in the centre section.



minutes duration each, each being washed off with copious amounts of water) that had been designed to strip polluted encrustations from marble buildings and that would most certainly strip all organic material – which in the event would include Michelangelo’s own glue-based painting – from the ceiling’s plaster surface.

Because Carnevale’s own painted repair was not so vulnerable we now see in the repaired (centre) section a better record of how Michelangelo’s own painting had appeared than exists in the surviving sections of Michelangelo’s painting. By properly reading the testimony of this photographic record, we can calculate the scale of loss that ensued when Michelangelo’s own a secco work on the surface of his frescoes was removed.

By that method, Michelangelo had painted shadows onto his figures after the plaster had dried. After the recent removal of those shadows a figure emerged (as seen right) with arms that were apparently depicted flatly and without tonal modulation in a single local colour/tone by Michelangelo on either side of a section by Carnevale where the forms of the arms were fully modelled by dramatic shading. Could that ever have been the case? Would Carnevale have been allowed to conduct a master-class demonstration to Michelangelo on how to render painted forms sculpturally? Those who still defend this restoration – as some British newspaper art critics do – might attempt to offer some credible explanation for this startling visual and plastic mismatch, which presently stands as the largest elephant in the art restoration room.

The crime against art that this restoration constituted was compounded by art historical apologists who claimed that the Michelangelo everyone for nearly five centuries had thought existed, had never existed, and that a new, true Michelangelo who, far from being “essentially a sculptor” was “one of the great colourists of Western Art”, had been uncovered by courtesy of a single cleaning. To justify this historically revisionist and artistically subverting “outcome”, apologists for the restoration were obliged to offer one of the most cockamamie art historical/technical accounts: namely, that what had “deceived” Michelangelo’s own contemporaries and everyone else for nearly five centuries had been nothing more than the effects of dirt and soot that had slowly and imperceptibly accumulated on the ceiling’s frescoes over the centuries.

This deceiving filthy material had, the artistically credulous are invited to accept, artfully arranged itself around Michelangelo’s flat, bright,



Above, Fig. 3: a detail showing, in the centre section, the arms of Esther as restored in 1566 by Domenico Carnevale.



Above, Fig. 4: the left-hand section of Michelangelo’s pendentive depicting “The Punishment of Haman”, as seen before the last restoration. Note the close conformity between the tonal/shadowy zone occupied by the figures as seen here and that recorded in the engraving of 1796 by Domenic Cunego in Fig. 6.



Above, Fig. 5: the left-hand section of the pendentive “The Punishment of Haman”, before cleaning.



“colouristic” designs so as to mimic the effects of the very sculptural preoccupations for which Michelangelo was already famed. In due course, it was further suggested, this artful dirt and soot had been set in glue by successive restorers, who, on one occasion, it is said, did so while standing on the top of thirty feet high step-ladders while brandishing glue-filled sponges tied to the end of thirty feet long poles. When the Vatican authorities were challenged on this account (by us) they had to admit that no proof existed of any glues ever having been applied by any restorers. What the Vatican authorities might also have admitted is that a further indisputable technical proof of Michelangelo’s authorship of the glue-painting on the fresco surface had emerged in the 19th century when the Vatican made its own moveable scaffold available to the British painter Charles Heath Wilson – and that this testimony was known to them. On examining the ceiling, Wilson had found that:

“...the frescoes are extensively retouched with size-colour...evidently by the hand of Michelangelo”.

Wilson could not only see this glue painting on the plaster surface, he could touch it:

“The colour readily melted on being touched with a wet finger and consisted of a finely ground black, mixed with a size...The shadows of the drapery have been boldy and solidly retouched with this size colour, as well as the shadows on the backgrounds. This is the case not only in the groups of the Prophets and the Sybils, but also in those of the Ancestors of Christ in the lunettes and the ornamental portions are retouched in the same way. The hair of the heads and beards of many of the figures are finished in size colour, whilst the shadows are also thus strengthened, other parts are glazed with the same material, and even portions of the fresco are passed over with the size, without any admixture of colour, precisely as the force of water colour drawings is increased with washes of gum...These retouchings, as usual with all the masters of the art at the time, constituted the finishing process or as Condivi expresses it, ‘l’ultima mano’.”

In addition to his expert (i.e. artist’s) testimony, Wilson offered two further material proofs of Michelangelo’s authorship that might otherwise have been expected to be considered clinching by today’s “scientific” restorers:

“They [the retouchings] were evidently done all at the same time and therefore when the [original] scaffold was in its place.”

“There can be no doubt that nearly all of this work



Above, Fig. 6: the pendentive “The Punishment of Haman”, as engraved in 1796 by Domenic Cunego. Note particularly, here, the skilful placement of the darkest tones in the three corners of the pendentive. And, the masterly use of light and shade to articulate the roles of the principal and secondary figures. Pulling the (very sketchily drawn) group at the left out of their original shadow, as occurred in the recent restoration, did them no favours and did great violence to the disposition of Michelangelo’s own pictorial values. Few will doubt that Michelangelo had intended to place the greatest possible emphasis on his central crucified figure – an invention which constituted an astonishing tour de force in its day by means of the violent planar opposition of the knees, which are parallel with the picture plane, to that of the hands, which contrarily advance upon it at a near right angle. This great figural innovation is emphasised by the artist in the similarly acute foreshortening of the wall to the right of Haman.



Above, Fig. 7: the figures of Esther and King Ahasuerus, after restoration.



Above, Fig. 8: Michelangelo’s depiction of God in “The Separation of the Earth from the Waters”, as engraved by Domenico Cunego, 1772-1780. Note the remarkable similarity between the shading of God’s left arm and that reproduced by Carnevale in his treatment of Esther’s

is contemporary, and in one part only was there evidence of a later and incapable hand. The size colour has cracked as the plaster has cracked, but apart from this appearance of age, the retouchings have all the characteristics of original work.”

It is a matter of record that the ceiling cracked before any restorers went near it. If the size painting cracked with the plaster, it must have predated the cracking – and, therefore, also that of any restorer’s intervention. Or, to reverse the testimony: if the glue had been applied by restorers long after Michelangelo had painted the ceiling and long after the ceiling had cracked, as has been suggested, it would have run into the already extensive cracks – but it was not and it had not. We can thus be in no doubt that today’s restorers removed the final stages of Michelangelo’s own work; that the “New Michelangelo” they had “discovered” was nothing more than the mutilated remains of his original work that they had left on the ceiling; that no part of the ceiling had escaped the consequences of their labours.

The last restorers of Michelangelo’s ceiling frescoes seem not fully to have heeded the cautionary evidence of their predecessors’ mishaps. The warnings – both pictorial and documentary – were clear enough. We see in the photograph of the left hand of God from Michelangelo’s “The Separation of the Earth from the Waters” (Fig. 10) that there is today a great mismatch between the sleeve and the fragment of cuff that had been repaired by Carnevale. Engraved copies of the 18th and 19th centuries (see Figs. 8 & 9) suggest that losses of shading to God’s left arm preceded the latest restoration. Charles Heath Wilson, who complained of the ceiling’s filthy and neglected condition and believed that it would profit from cleaning, nonetheless warned in terms against any watery interventions. Not only had he found Michelangelo’s size-painting vulnerable to a wetted finger, he complained that parts of the ceiling had already “undoubtedly been injured by rude [restoration] hands, suggesting that glazing has been partially or entirely swept away” and that great restoration injuries had previously occurred when the ceiling had been “washed by labouring men with water in which a caustic has been mixed”. (For details of the recent water-based cleaning methods, see bottom right.) The consequences of water injuries had been set out by Wilson:

“Thus great brushes or sponges have been swept over the skies and backgrounds and have not only removed dirt in a coarse unequal way, but have

arms.



Above, Fig. 9: Michelangelo’s “The Separation of the Earth from the Waters”, as engraved by Attilio Palombi in 1887.



Above, Fig. 10: The left hand of God in “The Separation of the Earth from the Waters”, after the recent cleaning. The diagonal crack entering at the top, centre, bounds the area of Carnevale’s restoration of the hand and part of the cuff, made in accordance with the tonal values found on the figure in 1566.

For a celebration of the restored ceiling, see “Michelangelo – the Vatican Frescoes” by Pierluigi de Vecchi, Professor of Art History at the University of Macerata, and Gianluigi Colalucci, Chief Restorer, Vatican Laboratory for the Restoration of Paintings, Papal Monuments, Museums and Galleries, New York, London and Paris 1996.

For a celebration of the restoration and an account of its cleaning methods, see “The Sistine Chapel – Michelangelo Rediscovered” with contributions from: Carlo Pietrangeli, Director General of the Papal Monuments, Museums and Galleries; Professor Andre Chastel; Professor John Shearman; Professor John O’Malley, S.J.; Professor Pierluigi de Vecchi; Professor Michael Hirst; Fabrizio Mancinelli, Curator of Byzantine, Medieval and Modern Art, Papal Monuments, Museums and Galleries; Gianluigi Colalucci, Head Restorer, Laboratory for the Restoration of Paintings, Papal Monuments, Museums and Galleries, published London, 1986.

eaten into the colours and destroyed them in a variety of places. The Face, shoulder and arms of the prophet Daniel, various parts of the bodies and limbs of the young men sitting over the cornice and other portions of the frescoes have been nearly obliterated by this savage proceeding. The Injury done is irremediable, for the surface of Michelangelo's work has been swept away."

Michael Daley

For a full account of the ceiling's injuries, see "Art Restoration ~ The Culture, The Business and The Scandal", London 1993 and 1996, New York 1994, by James Beck and Michael Daley.

For evidence of injuries to the prophet Daniel, see our post of [January 23rd 2011](#).

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The cleaning method here identified reads in part: "...Removal of retouchings and repaintings with a mixed gelatinous solvent, consisting of ammonium bicarbonate, sodium bicarbonate, Desogen (a surf-actant and anti-fungal agent), carboxymethylcellulose (a thixotropic agent), dissolved in distilled water. Mixture acts on contact. The times of application, rigorously measured, were:

First application: 3 minutes, followed by removal, washing with water. Left to dry for 24 hours.

Second application: 3 minutes, followed by removal, washing and leaving to dry as before. If necessary, and locally only, small applications, followed by plentiful final washing.

In the case of salt efflorescences consisting of calcium carbonate, there was added to the solvent mixture a saturated solution of dimethylformamide...

Final treatment: the thorough, complete and overall application of a solution of Paraloid B72 diluted to 3% in organic solvent, removed from the surface of the pictorial skin by the combined action almost simultaneously of organic solvent and distilled water, which coagulates the surface acrylic resin dissolved by the solvent."

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