

0. SISTINE CHAPEL and the VATICAN SCAVI - Story
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Left half of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, after its most-recent restoration (1980-1994).

Looking up, inside a rather nondescript building in Vatican City where new Popes are elected - watch the video link to see how that occurs - we see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, an artistic marvel. Looking down, in a not-so-distant place, we see the Vatican Scavi - a city of the dead. What do these places signify?

Every year, millions of people view the Sistine Chapel. Because of its popularity, and sheer size, the chapel is often called the world's most famous work of art, created by some of the world's best artists.

But here's a question about the ceiling, which Michelangelo painted. Aside from its beauty, what does the ceiling mean? Are the complex pictorial codes (which Michelangelo designed) and the beautiful iconography (which he painted) telling us something? Or ... is the whole creation, with its row-upon-row of pictures, simply a beautiful piece of work?

And ... what are we to make of Michelangelo's beginning and ending scenes - The Creation of Adam and The Last Judgment? What do those works tell us about Michelangelo's conception of God? Is this his answer to the Biblical question: "What is man, that You are mindful of him?"

Pope Julius II took a keen interest in the Sistine's paintings. He was, after all, the nephew of the Sistine's builder - Pope Sixtus IV (known as Francesco della Rovere before his elevation to the papacy).

Did Giuliano della Rovere (as Julius was called at birth) know, or suspect, that his uncle believed their family would play a role in foretelling the end of the world? Did Julius believe that, too? Is that why the Sistine's paintings appear as they do?

Recent thinking (expressed by some art historians and critics) suggests that the meaning of all the Sistine paintings can be summarized by just one: *The Last Judgment*. In other words, God created man; man disobeyed; God gave man more chances; man still disobeyed and - at the end of the world - God will have his revenge. Put differently ... look around at the Sistine paintings and you, too, can grasp their ultimate meaning. Or ... so some writers say.

We may never know because Michelangelo's surviving letters - and there are hundreds of them - provide no explanation for his approach to the work. We are therefore left to marvel at the beauty of his paintings and merely wonder what he had in mind.

More mystery surrounds us when we look down in Vatican City - down about thirty feet, or so, at the Vatican Scavi. The air is moist, and the smell is musty, in this Vatican necropolis. We are descending into ... an ancient burial ground ... three stories below street level. The place was rediscovered, in the twentieth century, and no more than 250 visitors are allowed to see it every day.

There's a special passageway, lending even more spookiness to its entrance. Along the Street of the Dead, we see lots of frescoes on the walls and curved niches in the stucco. We also see small houses - mausoleums - some of whose inhabitants (now in the form of ashes) are inside urns. These colorful rooms are the leftovers of Rome's earliest dwellers.

The Scavi's subterranean tunnels are not exactly the same as Rome's other place of the dead - its catacombs. There, row upon row of small shelves house the bodies of individuals who, at full height, were much shorter (on average) than people are today. Here, if one follows the passageways with a guide, the ultimate view is the claimed grave site of an important individual in church history.

At the end of the quest, directly below the alter of St. Peter's Basilica, is the place where Vatican officials believe Peter, the disciple of Jesus, was buried.

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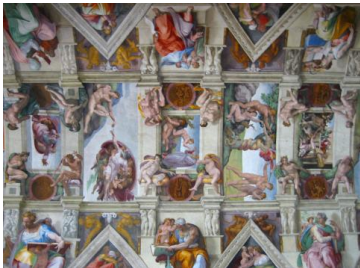
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Media Stream



Sistine Chapel - Exterior View

Photo by Maus-Trauden, taken in September, 2005. Online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.
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Sistine Chapel - Ceiling View

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.
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Vatican Scavi - Tomb in the Necropolis

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Sistine Chapel - Interior View

Image online, courtesy Web Gallery of Art.
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Sistine Chapel Ceiling - After Restoration

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Michelangelo - Creation of Adam

The Creation of Adam, at the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Michelangelo-Creation-of-Adam>



Vatican Necropolis - Tomb of the Teacher

Photo from Guide to the Vatican Necropolis, by Michele Basso, published by Fabbrica di S. Pietro in Vaticano (1986). Image online, courtesy St Peters Basilica.org.

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Michelangelo - The Last Judgment at the Sistine

Image of *The Last Judgment*, at the Sistine Chapel. Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Street of the Dead - Vatican Scavi

Photo from the Vatican Archives - published in *The Bones of St. Peter*, by John Evangelist Walsh, Doubleday & Co., New York (1982). Image online, courtesy St Peters Basilica.org.

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4. The narrow street running between the two rows of second-century Roman tombs beneath the basilica. As with the tombs' interiors, the street too was buried under many tons of earth-fill. The view is west, looking toward the area under the basilica's high altar.

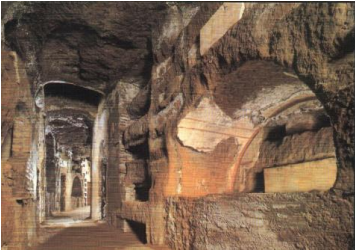


Vatican Necropolis - Tomb of the Chariot

Photo from *Guide to the Vatican Necropolis*, by Michele Basso, published by Fabbrica di S. Pietro in Vaticano (1986). Image online, courtesy St Peters Basilica.org.

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Rome - Catacombs of Callisto

Image online, courtesy the euroescapadas.com website.

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Michelangelo and Julius II - Creation of Adam

Video online, via YouTube.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Michelangelo-and-Julius-II-Creation-of-Adam>



Sistine Chapel - A Close Inspection of the Frescoes

Video clip online, courtesy vee1rotate's Channel at YouTube.

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