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Ana Schnellmann

Lindenwood University, aschnellmann@lindenwood.edu

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MICHELANGELO’S *LAST JUDGMENT*: A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

Ana Schnellmann

Dr. James Hutson

Renaissance Art

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Michelangelo, that fascinating Italian Renaissance sculptor, painter, and architect has been a source of wonder and intrigue since his own times. Vasari refers to Michelangelo's birth as a gift from the gods[1], and Athos writes "In his own time, it was said that Michelangelo's work rivaled God's, and his force and authority are still overwhelming."[2] Indeed, the power of Michelangelo is still great. People flock from around the globe to marvel at his marbles. The *David*, the *Pieta,* the *Bacchus,* (Figures 1, 2, and 3) and many others are sculptures so beautiful that the marble seems to breathe, to break out of their marble skins. In painting as well as in sculpture, Michelangelo shines. In the ceiling paintings of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's neo-platonic, graceful, classically-influenced figures, albeit ones reluctantly painted, give us, in Arthos' words, "the freshness of Earthly Paradise,"[3] as well as clearly understood messages and Biblical stories. Yet, it is in the fresco *The Last Judgment,* made for the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, from 1534-41, that we see most clearly Michelangelo's brilliant, conflicted, anguished, arrogant self. (Figure 4). Begun approximately twenty years after the completion of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and nineteen years after Martin Luther's initiation of the Reformation, Michelangelo's frameless fresco, *The Last Judgment,* shows us evidence of the artist's shifting psychology, a psychology which celebrates all the awe and terror inherent in the sublime, but a side which also admits to the immense strain and tension, as well as the underlying anxiety and restless energy experienced by Michelangelo in the latter part of his life. Michelangelo, in this fresco, gives the viewer a manifesto and a warning. Nobody, not even the highest ranking members of the Church, not even the most gifted artists, can evade the day of reckoning.

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[1] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of Seventy Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, Volume IV*. Editors EH and EW Blashfield and AA Hopkins. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896, 1923), 36.

[2] John Arthos, *Dante, Michelangelo, and Milton* (London: Routledge Press, 1963), 50.

[3] Arthos, *Dante, Michelangelo, and Milton*, 51.

Moreover, Michelangelo makes a clear point that not only people's actions but their characters that determine their ultimate fate. The impassive Christ, the seemingly impotent Mary, and the shock of the skin of Bartholomew, on which it seems Michelangelo painted his own face, all add to the general effect of hope and fear, anxiety and unrest, doubt and faith all juxtaposed in the fresco.

Not insignificantly, *The Last Judgment* is placed on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel where the most important leaders of the Roman Catholic Church would see it during their most important duties and functions. As well, as Valerie Shrimplin discusses, the mouth of the Hell Cave is situated directly over the altar itself even as Charon directs the damned to their doom on the lower right.[4] Shrimplin further asserts *The Last Judgment* is different from other works using the same theme as the Hell portrayed therein shows little physical torment but instead displays the psychological despair of the damned.[5] In saying Mass before *The Last Judgment*, the celebrant would look up directly at the Cave of Hell, at the looming, corpulent Christ, at the crouching Madonna, and, at every Mass, every function in this most important chapel, Michelangelo's ideals, fears, and philosophies would be reinforced; at every viewing, manifested again would be the strain and tension, the anxiety and the energy, of Roman Catholic Church. In Bernadine Barnes' words, "Hope and fear, glory and humiliation, were held in the balance. Spectators would have a real part in this event, and various techniques are used to include them."[6] There is no one specific lesson, no one specific belief, however, that Michelangelo seems to be promoting in his fresco. There is neither promise of heaven nor graphic portrayal of hell—instead, the artist gives us the sheer and lasting immediacy of psychological experience.

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[4] Valerie Shrimplin, *Sun, Symbolism, and Cosmology in Michelangelo's* Last Judgment, (Kirksville, Truman UP, 2000), 86.

[5] Shrimplin, *Sun, Symbolism,* 87.

[6] Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo's* Last Judgment*: The Renaissance Response*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

Certainly, much of the psychological immediacy of *The Last Judgment* reflects Dante's *Divina Commedia,* which, as David Summers notes, Michelangelo knew by heart.[7] Like Dante, Michelangelo seems to present Hell not as an actual place of physical torment, but as a place of the absence of God, love, and enlightenment, a darkness of the soul. Dante journeys through the nine circles of Hell before he has a chance to ascend to Heaven and the "peace which passeth all understanding." [8] Michelangelo, known as a solitary one and even as a misanthropic one, long labored passionately with the conflict, like Dante's, between life experience and orthodox belief, between the need to trust the Church and his experiences with the Church that led to his suspicion of it. While never taking religion or dogma lightly, Michelangelo is certainly not above poking fun at religious figures as we see in his casting of Biago da Cesena as an ass-eared Minos (Figure 5). Hell, to Michelangelo, is metaphorical, but the metaphorical hell is no less frightening and no less dreadful than an actual, physical place would be. In Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, we see very little actual, physical torment, but the mental torment and psychological suffering of many of the figures serves as an even more horrifying warning about choices and their consequences. Most would agree that psychological anguish is worse than physical pain. thus Instead of depictions of graphic punishments as in earlier works of the same theme, there is a maelstrom of movement, a sense of unease, a nervous agitation which perhaps mirrors that experienced by the anguished artist.

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[7] David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art,* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1981), 9.

[8] Philippians 4:7, (King James Version).

Whereas, again, other depictions of the last judgment, such as Giotto's, (Figure 6), show the viewer graphic physical consequences for the damned, Michelangelo shows us instead the consequences of choices as well as the idea that these are not simply acts of willful disobedience, but may be, instead, instances of *hamartia*, of a missing of the mark as people journey from their cradles to their crypts. Indeed, when we contemplate the image of the "Damned One" in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, (Figure 7), we see a man covering one eye, the other open in terror. A laughing demon hugs the man's legs as the man passively floats, awaiting his fate. There is no symbol of a specific sin here, just a portrait of a worried, resigned, man. The "Damned One" is not separate from the viewer; the viewer does not have the luxury of saying "I would never do what he/she did." Instead, the viewer also probably goes through life with one eye covered, the other opened fearfully. The viewer, too, is the Damned One.

Because the viewer of *The Last Judgment* can relate to the damned, it is very likely that the viewer has sympathy for the damned, just as the reader of Dante's *Divina Commedia* has sympathy for many of the sinners such as the adulterers Paolo and Francesca who were caught up in their passion after reading together a love story. Indeed, in Circle 7, Dante presents his own teacher, Brunetto, damned for the sin of sodomy, as a victor running on the burning sands. People are people; some will be damned and some will be saved. In the work of both Dante and Michelangelo, the end of time is simply a continuance of life on earth. In *The Last Judgment*, movement is nearly frenetic but is, ironically, weighted down by the corpulence of the figures and is therefore presented as awkward. There is no discernible order to the movement itself, as the damned do not file meekly to Hell, as in Giotto's *Last Judgment*, nor do the saved line up snugly near Christ. In contrast, the damned are pushed and shoved by Charon, by angels, by demons, to their respective places and the saved, rather than floating gently to their reward, are dragged upward by struggling angels and straining saints. Moreover, even the saints in Michelangelo's work look nervous and less than assured of their salvation. St. Sebastian, St. Catherine, St. Lawrence, and St. Bartholomew, among others, brandish the instruments of their deaths as they look nervously toward Christ, even as the elect in the lower right-hand corner of the piece seem to cling to their graves. The energy is palpable, but the certainty of salvation is available to nobody, not even to popes or cardinals.

Interestingly, in such a public place as the Sistine Chapel in which Michelangelo had a clear opportunity to be clear about his views regarding the Church, he avoids being overtly didactic and is, instead, seemingly deliberately ambiguous. Indeed, nowhere in *The Last Judgment* are their easily-identified "good people" juxtaposed with easily-identified "bad people." As James Hall notes, "Before Michelangelo, no artist had ever failed to clearly distinguish the damned from the saved."[9] Barnes writes, "There are too many details that are confusing, too many transgressions of conventions that seem to make a simple statement much more complex."[10] Although the saved vastly outnumber the damned, each class of people share the same physiognomy, the same body type, and even the same worried expressions. St. Peter, for instance, depicted on Christ's left side, this placement itself a break from convention, crouches slightly as he extends toward Christ the keys to the heavenly kingdom, keeping the handle of the keys, however, in his own hands. St. Peter's intent expression, as well as the expression of the saint next to him, claimed by Barnes to be St. Paul, shows again that salvation is not assured, even for the keeper of the keys and the protector of the faith[11] (Figure 8). This warning is reinforced by the figure of the man whose money bag pulls him toward Charon's barque. The seven angels strain to blow their trumpets and wake the dead as demons struggle to grab the souls they have won. The angels and guardians of the elect are not free from work either as their muscles bulge with the effort it takes to drag the select to their rightful place by the legs in one case, by the belt in another, in a third case by a rosary. Yet, in all of this frenzy, three faces seem to retain composure: those of Christ, his mother, and the face, perhaps, of Michelangelo himself, painted on the empty skin held by St. Bartholomew.

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[9] James Hall, *Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005), 137.

[10] Barnes, *Michelangelo's* Last Judgment, 3.

[11] Ibid.

The depiction of Christ in this work is, critics agree, a confusing one. Whereas in *The Last Judgment* by Giotto and the work of the same name by Fra Angelico, Christ clearly blesses the elect with his right hand as he shuns the damned with his left, in Michelangelo's work, there is no clear gesture of either benediction or condemnation (Figure 9). Christ's right hand is raised and even seems ready to smite, but this hand that is seemingly directed toward the damned is equally aligned with some of the most important figures of the Church, such as St. Peter, reinforcing again the equality of the select and the doomed. Christ's left hand, perhaps ironically, seems to be gesturing toward the elect and/or gesturing toward the wound on his side. The face of Christ also garners a great deal of attention from critics. John Dixon, Jr., for instance, claims it is a face that shows "firm, unsentimental compassion."[12] Bernadine Barnes agrees, writing "Michelangelo's Christ also seems to observe the consequences of men's actions without anger, only setting into motion what has already been decided."[13] Vasari, in contrast, asserts "The seated figure of our Lord, with a countenance terrible in anger, is turned toward the condemned, on whom he thunders anathema."[14] It is not only the countenance of Christ that is confusing, however; it is his posture. There is no method by which one may determine whether Christ is in the act of rising or of sitting. As in so many of his other works, Michelangelo uses a twisted pose to show imminent movement, but in this case, the direction of the movement is indiscernible. Also confusing is the fact that while Michelangelo depicts the wounds on Christ's hands, feet, and side, he omits any pictorial reference to the crown of thorns. In addition, the young, beardless, beefy Christ is indistinguishable, except by the hierarchy of scale, from the other figures in the work.

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[12] John Dixon, Jr, *The Christ of Michelangelo: An Essay on Carnal Spirituality,* (Florida: Scholars' Press, 1994), 68.

[13] Barnes, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment,* 60.

The depiction of the Virgin, like that of her son, is a perplexing one. Although Vasari characterizes the virgin as a horrified witness to the destruction of the damned,[15] critics such as Barnes note "her hands and legs are crossed in ways that might suggest cowering, yet her face is serene"[16] (Figure 9). Although Mary's hands are folded, they are not closed. Rather, her left index finger mirrors that of Christ's. Possibly, as Barnes implies, the Virgin is gesturing toward the Niobe group, the large, standing woman in which, according to Barnes, "recalls the old legends of the Virgin baring her breasts to Christ as she begged him for mercy when she saw the torments of the damned."[17] Yet, where Christ seems decisive with his squared jaw and full frontal posture, Mary seems hesitant. Although Mary's figure is smaller than that of her son's, she shares in his mandela. The two are one. Since the two are one, Mary shares not only the mandela but the power of Christ as well; therefore, it is possible that her intercession may still be viable, as we see through one of the saved being bodily lifted up by a rosary. This intercession is by no means certain, however. The placement of Mary's figure and face is again important. Those celebrating Mass and those in the chapel looking up at the fresco will not meet the eyes of either Mary or Christ, but they will see, most clearly, the mouth of the hell cave, reinforcing the idea of spiritual isolation on the day of judgment, an idea perhaps that Michelangelo made deliberately disturbing in this sacred place devoted to Mary and the cult of the Virgin.

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[14] Vasari, *Lives*, 142.
[15] Vasari, *Lives*, 142.
[16] Barnes, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment,* 62.
[17] Barnes, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment*, 65.

The figures and faces of Christ and his mother are puzzling indeed, but perhaps the most perplexing portrait in *The Last Judgment* is that of the artist himself painted on the empty skin held lightly, at the midpoint between heaven and hell, by St. Bartholomew (Figure 10). Leo Lerman writes fluently of the portrayal of Pietro Aretino as the model for St. Bartholomew, and Lerman characterizes Aretino as a "Tuscan shoe-maker's son, vagabond, [. . .] lackey, thief, hostler, money-lender, tax-collector, [. . .] mountebank, swindler, and guttersnipe,"[18] hardly characteristics one would choose in selecting a model for a saint and martyr. Significantly, Aretino was also a powerful man, what Lerman calls "an early gossip columnist,"[19] who "devoted his time to luxurious pleasures and his acid pen."[20] In the midst of his work on *The Last Judgment,* as Lerman recounts, Michelangelo received one of Aretino's letters which first lavished sycophantic praise on the artist, then offered suggestions as to how *The Last Judgment* should be constructed, and finally offered to represent Michelangelo for a small, negotiable fee: one of Michelangelo's original pieces of art for Aretino's vast collection. As we remember from the *Doni Tondo* episode as described by William Wallace, Michelangelo "exercised increasing control over all aspects of artistic production,"[21] and would be an elusive target for the extortion Aretino was attempting. According to Lerman, moreover, Michelangelo did not fall prey to Aretino, and his use of the portrait of this "Scourge of Princes" as one who had figuratively attempted to flay Michelangelo could be an appropriate reading.[22]

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[18] Leo Lerman, *Michelangelo: A Renaissance Portrait*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1942), 364.

[19] Lerman, *Michelangelo*, 365.

[20] Lerman, *Michelangelo*, 365.

A second possible interpretation of Michelangelo's self-portrait is reading the skin as a portrait not of Michelangelo's face, but of his psychological state, as is manifested by the gaping, open mouth on the skin. For seven years, Michelangelo had worked feverishly on the fresco, frequently falling into bouts of sheer, physical exhaustion, and, later, suffering from a fall off of a scaffold and refusing to see anyone. Michelangelo felt his advancing age strongly, and he feared death and perhaps the judgment he believed he had to face for his vanity. Indeed, in 1552, in a poignant poem, Michelangelo directly addresses the *vanitus vanitatum* theme when he ponders

> That impassioned fantasy, that, vague and vast,
> Made art an idol and a king to me, /
> Was an illusion, and but vanity
> Were the dreams that lured me, and harassed.
> The dreams of love, that were so sweet of yore—
> What are they now, when two deaths may be mine,
> One sure, and one forecasting its alarms?[23]

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[21] Wallace, William, *The Artist as Genius: A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*. Eds Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow, (New York: Wiley and Sons, 2013), 158.

[22] Lerman, *Michelangelo*, 367.

[23] Michelangelo, Sonnet, 1552, translated by HW Longfellow. In Robert Clements, Editor, *Michelangelo: A Self-Portrait*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), 169.

Perhaps the great artist and genius felt as though his substance was gone, that he had done what he could and what he was compelled to do in serving his mistress, Art, and the fate of his soul was completely out of his hands. Yet another interpretation of the skin held by St. Bartholomew is that the portrait is a reference, as Barnes believes, to the myth of Apollo and Marsyus in which Marsyus, a gifted by arrogant satyr, foolishly attempts to rival his own flute playing with that of the god of music, Apollo, and is flayed, after his defeat, for his hubris. Possibly, Barnes argues, Michelangelo fears he may be a new Marsyus, rivaling his beloved Dante.[24] Known as a genius in his own time, confident in his abilities from his youth, holding fast against the demands placed upon him, it is certainly possible that Michelangelo feared the work and love of his life was the gate to hell.

There is no doubt that Michelangelo, Renaissance master, will continue to capture the attention of all people, be they scholars, critics, art lovers, or simple those who see and marvel at his works. There is no way we can unravel the myriad layers of meaning in this master's work, especially a work as complex as *The Last Judgment*, but the mystery the work continues to provide makes this fresco breathe as sure as do Michelangelo's inimitable sculptures. Michelangelo--the artisan, the diplomat, the recluse, the poet, the stone-cutter, the painter, the philosopher, the student, the manual laborer—is irreducible and fascinating. The figures in *The Last Judgment*, so different, so various, are all part of the pool of humanity, and in this work, we are forever reflected.

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[24] Barnes, *Michelangelo's* Last Judgment, 107.

Illustrations

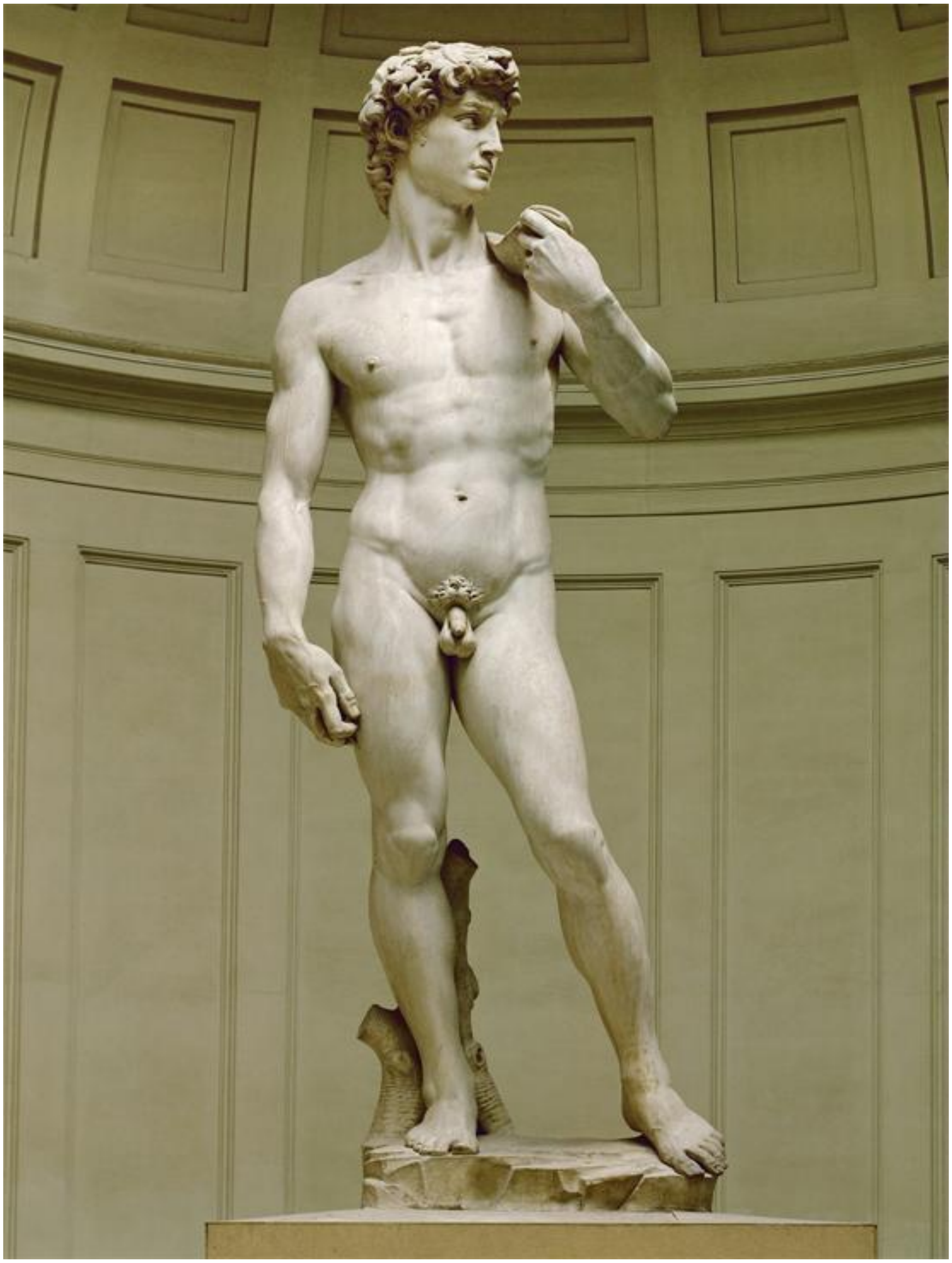


Figure 1: Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504.

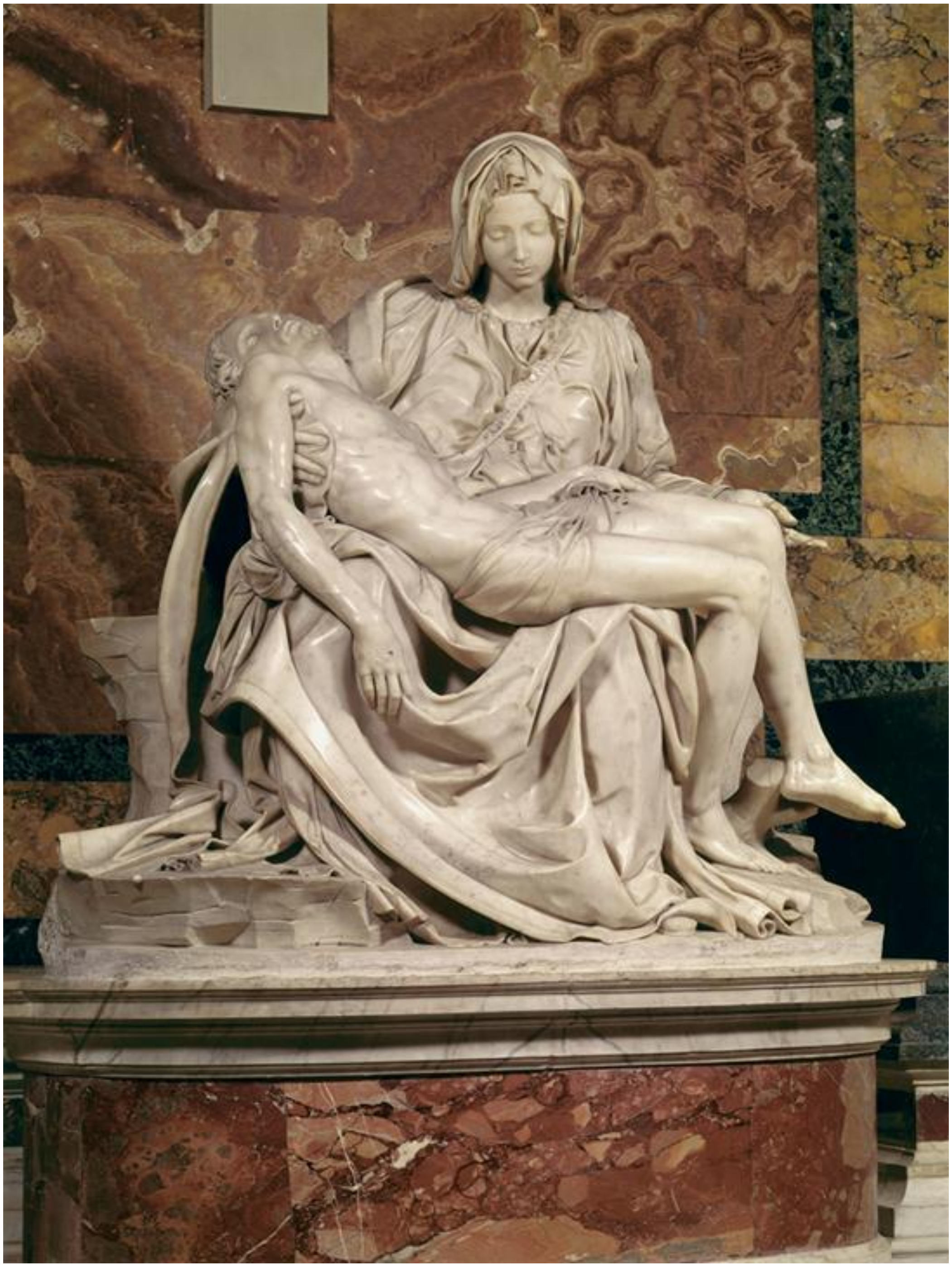


Figure 2: Michelangelo, *Pieta*

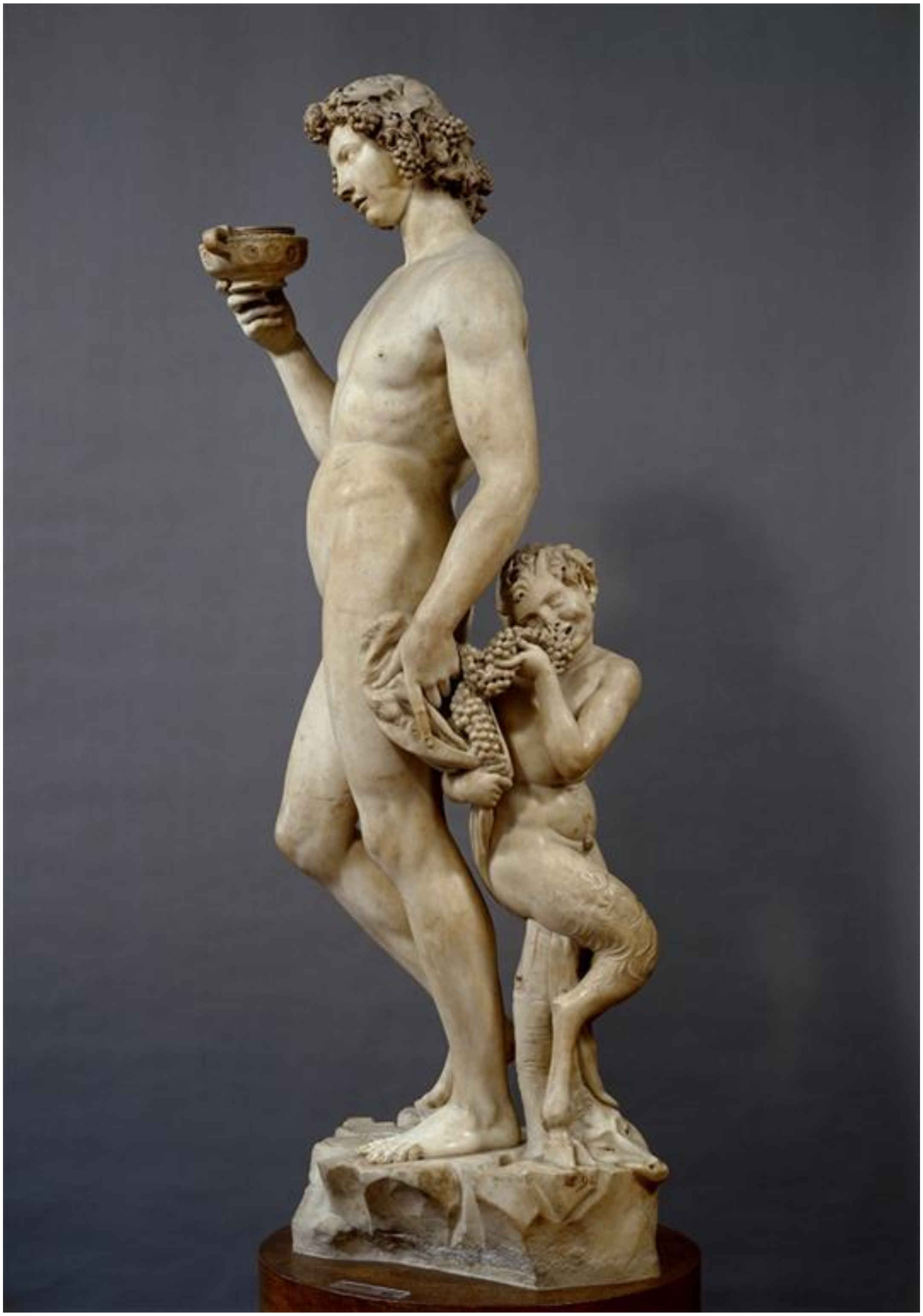


Figure 3: Michelangelo, *Bacchus*

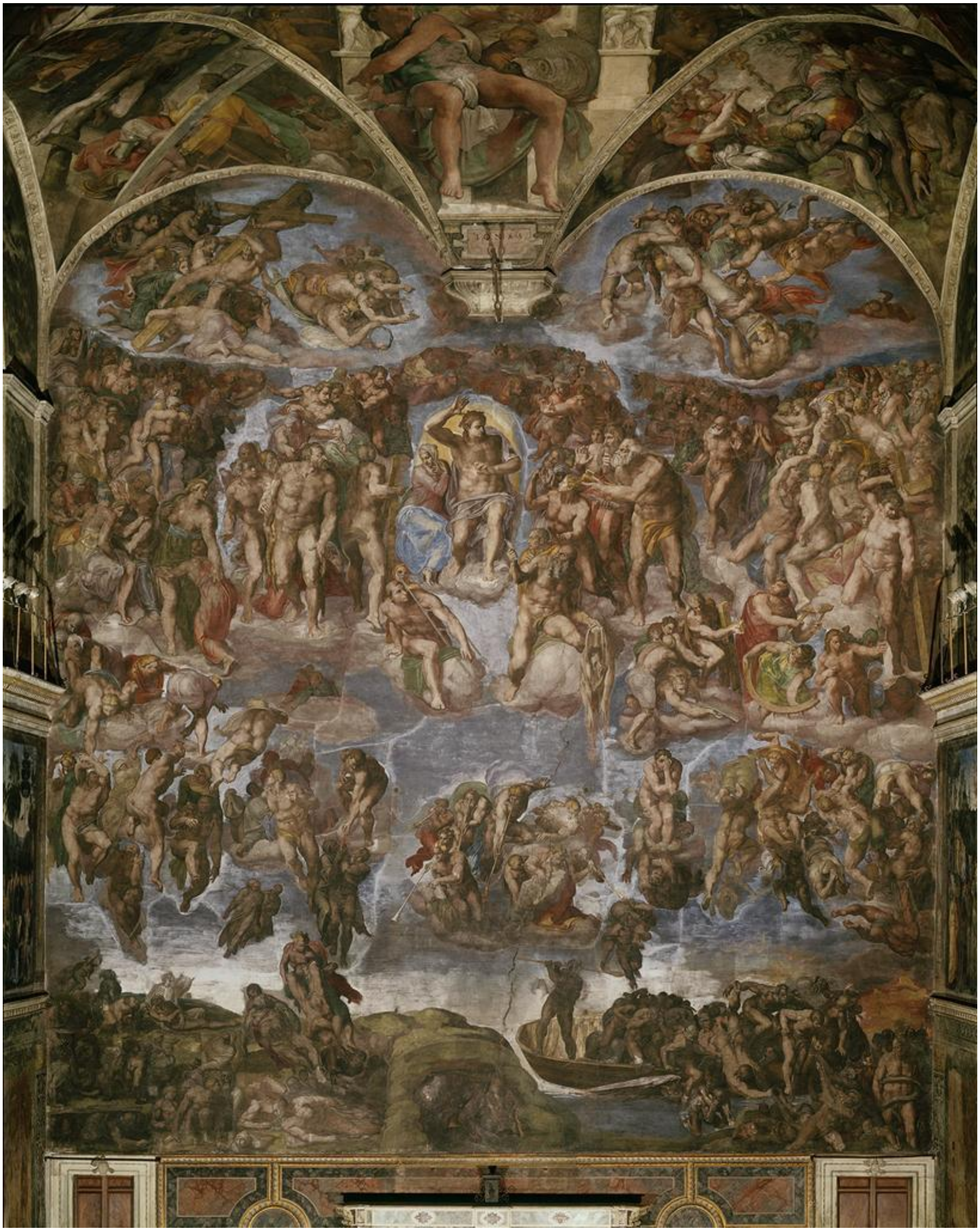
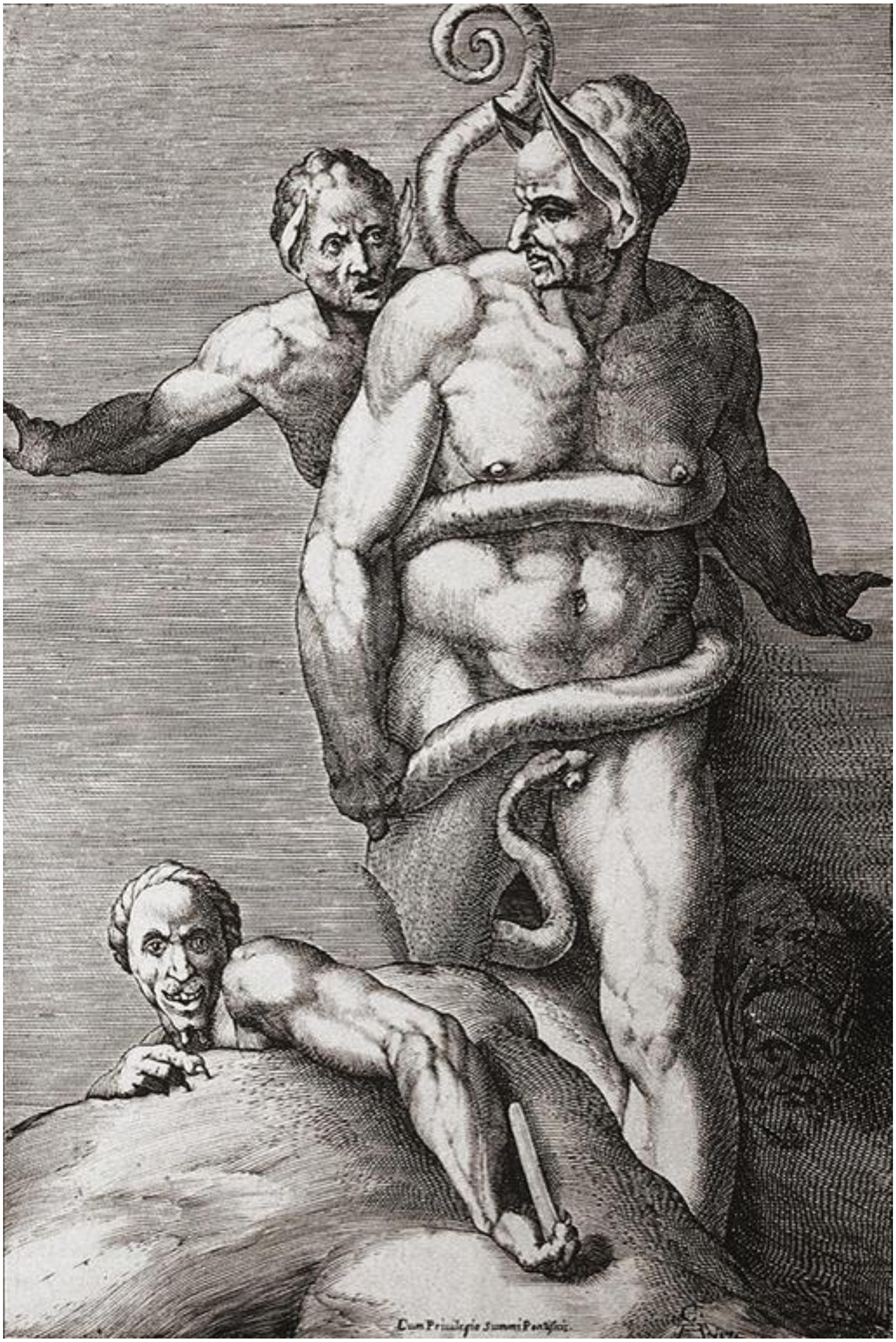


Figure 4: Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541



Cum Privilegio Summi Pontificis.

Figure 5: Detail: *Minos*, from Michelangelo's *Last Judgment,* 1534-1541

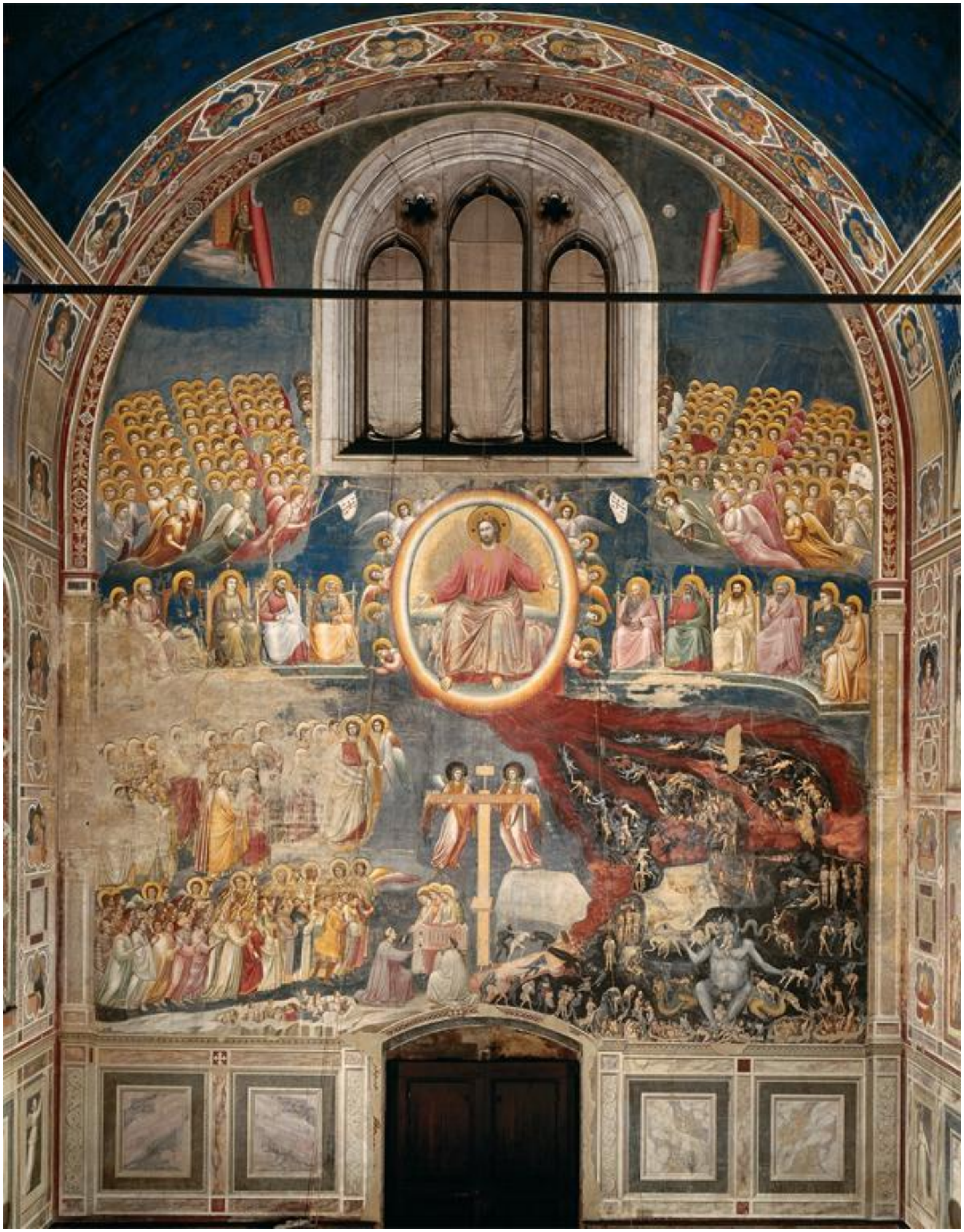


Figure 6: Giotto, *Last Judgment*, 1305

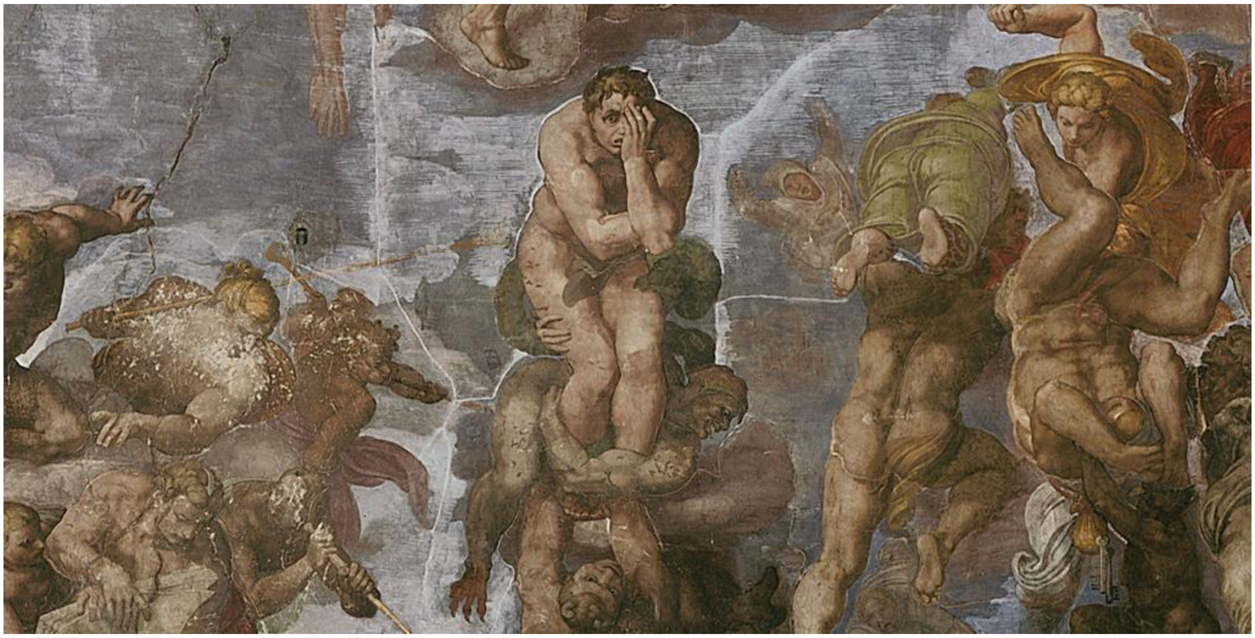


Figure 7, Detail from *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo, 1534-1541

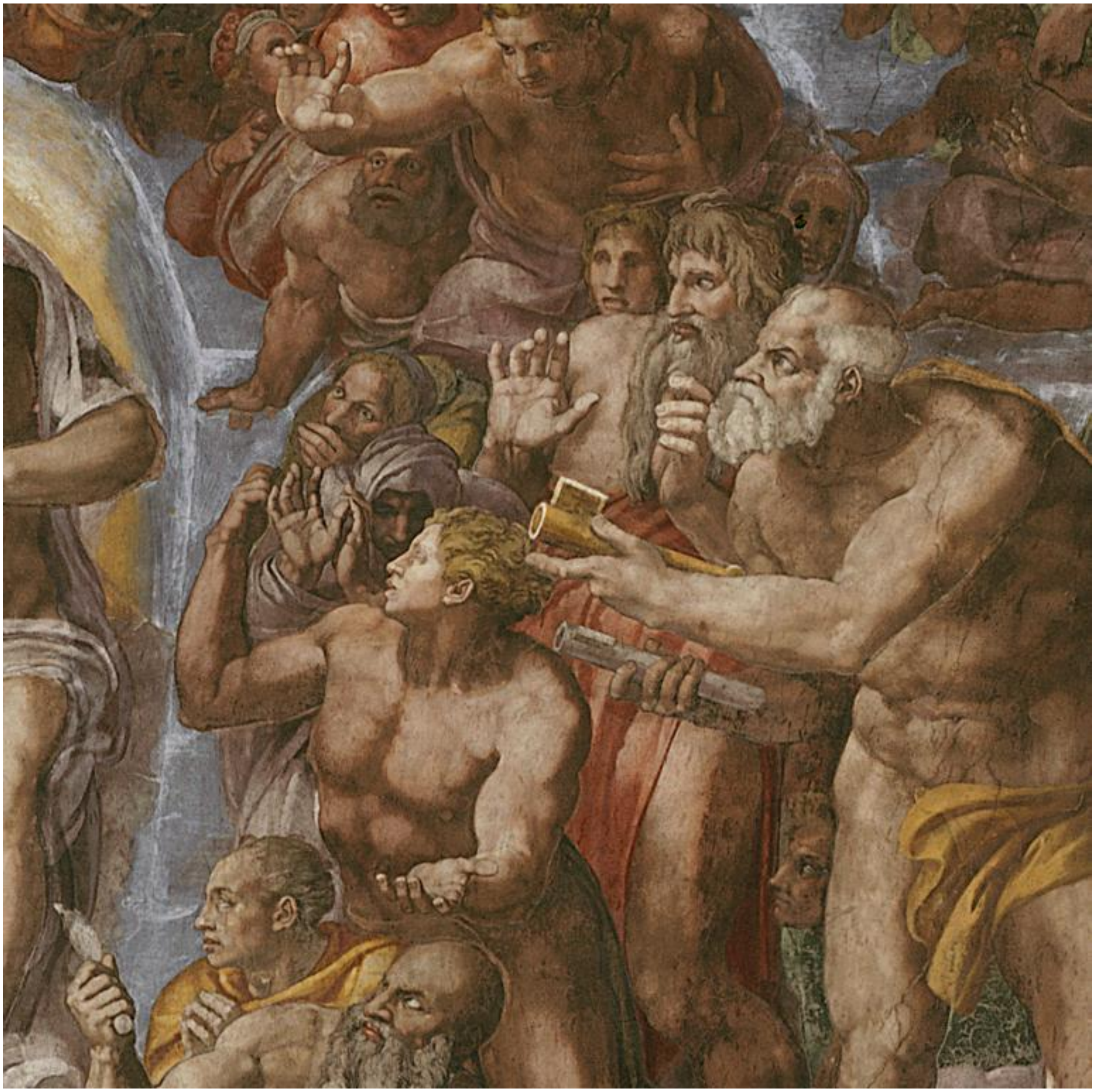


Figure 8: Detail, St. Peter and St. Paul (?), Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541

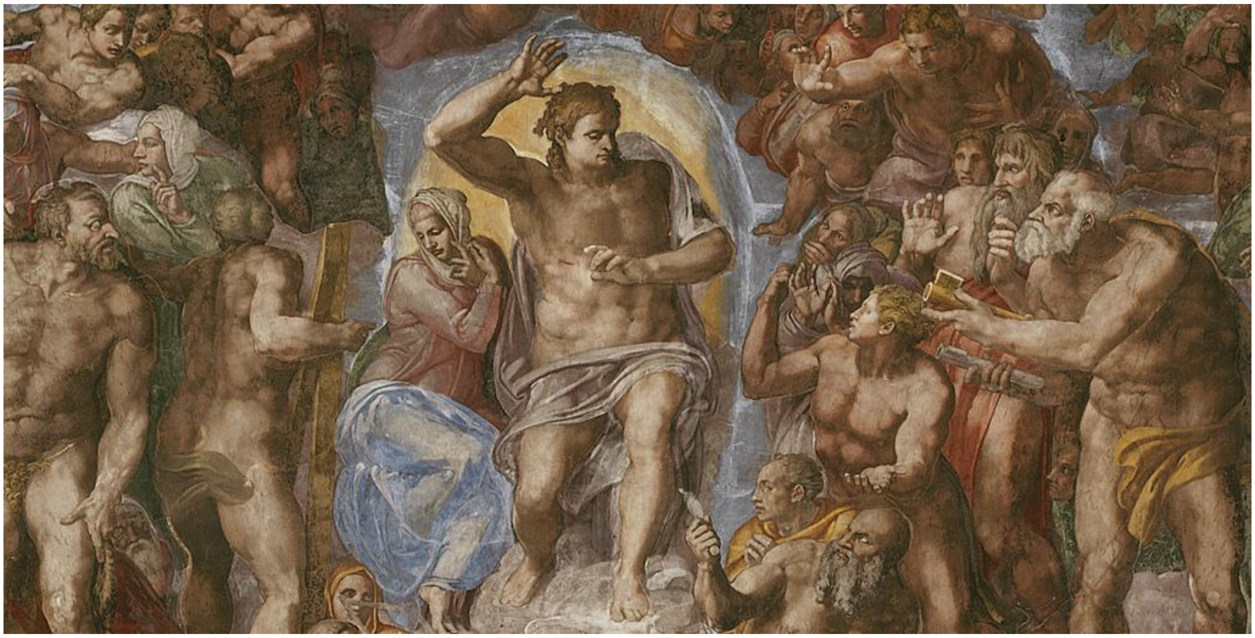


Figure 9: Detail, Christ and Mary, Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, 1534-1541

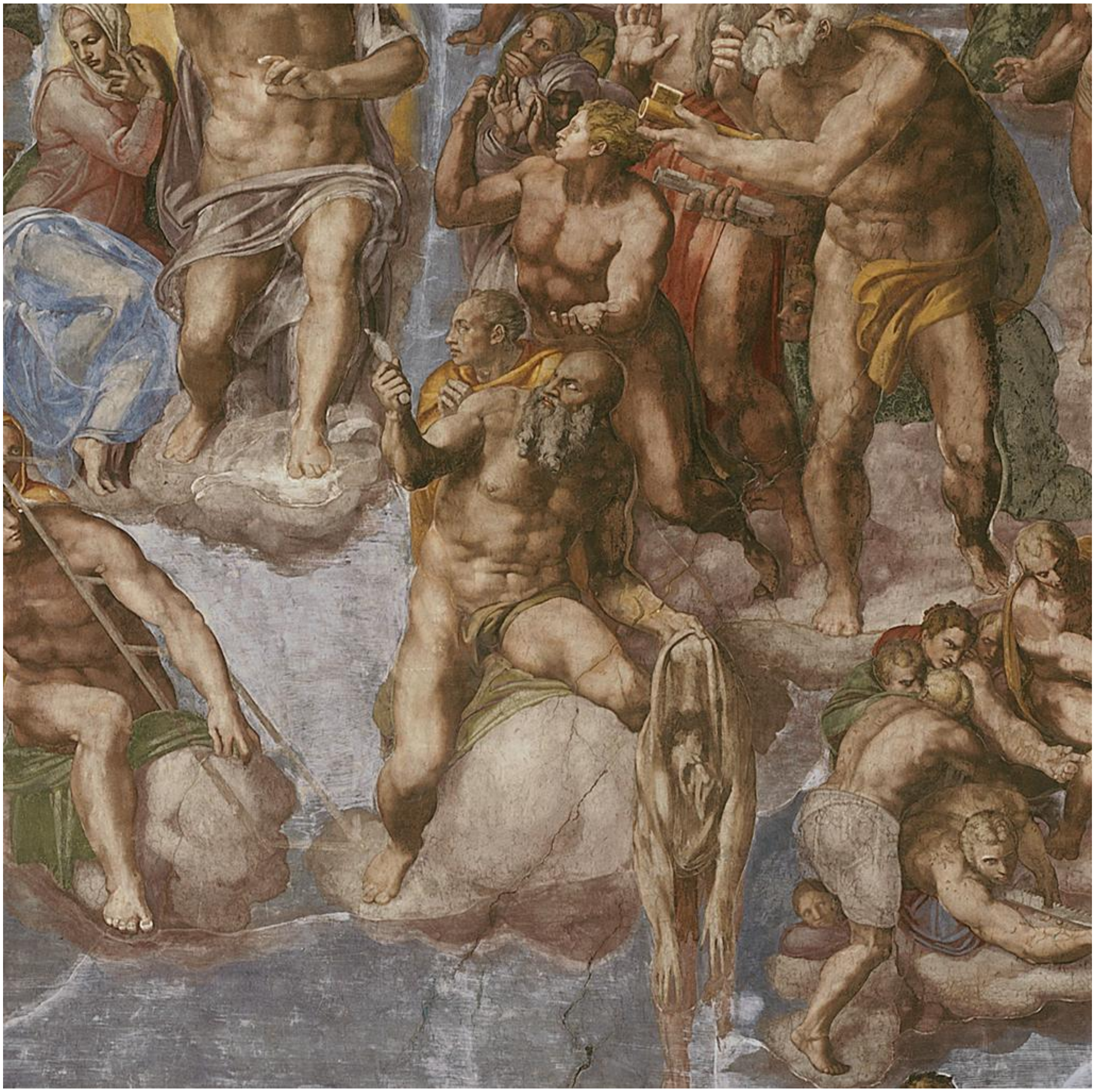


Figure 10: Detail, Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, 1534-1541

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