

Last Judgment

Pope Clement VII, who commissioned the work, had initially asked Michelangelo to paint a fresco of moderate size on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, depicting the *Resurrection of Christ*. However, this idea soon gave way to that of a grandiose representation of the *Judgment* covering the whole wall. On the death of Clement VII, the new pope, Paul III, renewed the commission to Michelangelo and was able to see the work completed in 1541. To make room for the fresco of the *Judgment*, the previous decorations were sacrificed. These were an altar frescoed by Perugino and the lunettes next to the wall, painted by Michelangelo himself. It is likely that at the outset the artist wanted to leave these paintings intact, as is suggested by a charcoal sketch in Casa Buonarroti in Florence, which shows a preliminary design that is less articulated and extensive than the final one.

Technique

The fresco was painted in almost four hundred and fifty sections, from the top downward, in horizontal strips as the scaffolding was progressively lowered. To prevent dust from settling on the surface and to improve the visibility of the painting, the wall was rebuilt in bricks with projecting tops, so that the upper part of the wall jutted outward. When Michelangelo realized that, without his knowledge, his friend Sebastiano del Piombo had prepared the wall to be painted with oil, he got very angry and had it plastered for fresco, in his view the only technique suited to mural painting. There is no doubt that the whole of the work was executed by Michelangelo himself, although his faithful friend Urbino may have helped to paint the backgrounds.

Iconography

The *Judgment* is one of the most famous works of art of all time and one of the most extensively discussed by art historians. Almost four hundred figures, with heights ranging from one and a half to two and a half meters, are arranged in a boundless cosmic space, devoid of any reference to nature or architecture. The teeming groups and figures stand out against the sky, which ranges in color from the dark shadow of the lower part to an increasingly bright blue in the upper part. The inspiration for the painting comes, although the interpretation is a truly original one, from Dante's poem, Tommaso da Celano's *Dies Irae*, and a number of other sources, including figurative ones such as Signorelli's frescoes in Orvieto.