

Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

Decorative Figures

The scenes and main figures of the ceiling are surrounded by a dense array of so-called decorative figures. On these figures, on their role in the organization of the representation and their significance, a great deal has been said and written. The most credible conclusion is that, in the various types of ornamental figure, Michelangelo and his client intended to allude to the three different components of the human being according to Neoplatonic philosophy. Thus, the putti holding tablets underneath the prophets and sibyls represent bodily nature, the figures set alongside the Seers the rational soul, and the naked figures above the intellectual soul. The caryatid putti, on the other hand, painted to resemble pairs of marble figures alongside the thrones of the Seers, would be elements of a simple and traditional architectural decoration. It should be noted that Michelangelo used a single cartoon for the pairs on each side of the same throne, simply reversing it. The enigmatic naked figures of bronze live in a separate world, partly because of their dark tonality. They are probably intended to be representations of the human unconscious, of the sphere of instinct, and for this reason are given expressions of fury or total abandon.

The naked figures, between 150 and 180 cm in height and in pairs, have the function of supporting festoons of plants and, by means of ribbons, bronze medallions. They are seated on cubes set above the thrones of the Seers. The festoons they are holding are made up of leaves of a particular type of oak, known as *rovere* in Italian, and are a clear reference to the name of the pope who commissioned the decoration, Julius II della Rovere. The twisting of their trunks and members indicates the influence of ancient statues like the Laocoön or the Belvedere Torso. Note the great variety of poses adopted and feelings expressed by these figures, a magnificent example of the master's imagination and creative capacity.

In the middle of the festoons are set circular bronze shields, with diameters ranging from 130 to 140 cm. On them scenes taken from the second and fourth Book of Kings of the Old Testament are represented in mock relief. This is one of the very few parts of the ceiling in which Michelangelo made use of gilding. One of the shields, set above the Persian Sibyl, has inexplicably been left without decoration.