

Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

Prophets and Sibyls

Their heights vary between 260 and 300 cm. There are seven prophets, based on Jewish tradition, and five sibyls, connected with Greek tradition, each accompanied by two assistants. It is not known what criterion was followed in their arrangement or what is the significance of the figures that are portrayed alongside them. The height of the prophets increases considerably, by as much as 40 cm, as they get closer to the altar. The explanation given for this is that the artist wanted to correct for the reduction in size caused by perspective for an observer looking at the ceiling from the entrance to the hall.

Delphic Sibyl. Stands out for her physical beauty and for this reason has been seen as an allusion to Cassandra. She appears to have similarities to the *Madonna's* of the artist's youth.

Joel. It has been claimed that the face is a portrait of Bramante, comparable with Raphael's figure of *Euclid* in the Stanza della Segnatura, which is also based on the architect.

Isaiah. According to Vasari he has stopped reading to talk to one of his putti assistants. Has been seen by some as a divine messenger.

Erythraean Sibyl. The Erythraean Sibyl is the most masculine of the female figures. Note the muscular arms and the powerful bust. An assistant is lighting a lantern for her, perhaps a symbol of divination.

Cumaean Sibyl. The aged appearance that Michelangelo gave to the Cumaean Sibyl has been interpreted in many different ways. Her ashen expression was seen as a premonition of tragedy, which would explain the moved expression of her assistants.

Ezekiel. The prophet is turning round to curse an epebic assistant, perhaps an angel, believed by some to be a girl and for this reason the source of many misogynous interpretations.

Daniel. Daniel has been portrayed engaged in the comparison of two texts, perhaps different versions of holy scriptures, a task in which he is assisted by youthful figures.

Persian Sibyl. She is flanked by clothed assistants and is represented as a shortsighted and hunchbacked old woman.

Libyan Sibyl. The sibyl is picking up her book with a sinuous and extremely feminine gesture («attitude of womanly grace» was how Vasari put it).

Jeremiah. The reflective expression has been seen as an interpretation of the painter's state of mind in a symbolic self portrait. The figure is reminiscent of Ghiberti's *Saint John* in the Baptistry.

Zechariah. According to Vasari the prophet Zechariah is seeking something in the book that he cannot find. He was also considered a symbol of the papacy, of prayer and law.

Jonah. The unusual pose is probably a reference to an episode from the prophet's life, an idea supported by the presence of the whale.