Our propensity to believe that an outline of the human brain is inscribed in one of the most famous paintings of the godhead is both a reflection of the revolution initiated by the Renaissance and a function of how the organ of our humanity psychophysically interprets images. In 1306, Giotto completed a cycle of frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua and signed them, thus forsaking the anonymity of the old art of the Middle Ages and Byzantium and initiating the Italian Renaissance, a period in which the personality of the Western artist became a conspicuous component of his artwork. The figures in Giotto's paintings bore strong resemblances to living models, and the emotive content of their faces was true to life. The rediscovery of Greek and Roman artifacts, with their idealized conception of the human form, and the importation into Europe via Arab scholars of the humanistic works of Greek philosophers prepared the Italian soil for the straightforward assertion of individual identity and the inexorable evolution of the cultural craftsman from artisan to artist. Whereas the primitive simplifications and flatness of Byzantium remained a strong influence on artists in Spain and in the Germanic north, the innovations of Giotto and his successors radically changed the depiction of the human form throughout the south; as a consequence of the discovery of single point perspective before 1413 by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi (4), this revolution reached its apogee towards the end of the fifteenth century in the city-states of Florence, Venice, and Rome. Almost two centuries after the completion of the Arena Chapel, artists regularly received commissions for both secular and religious subjects; in each realm they attempted to meld the religious prescriptions of the Catholic Church with the new emphasis on human agency. Today it is difficult for any commentator to write about the High Renaissance in Italy without sounding stupid or stupefied; five hundred years later on, what has not been said? Has there ever been praise enough for the group of artists that includes Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto in the north of Italy and Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo in the south? Of the three masters in Florence and Rome, Raphael died too young and largely restricted himself to painting, while Leonardo, both scientist and artist, was continuously subverted by his own curiosity so that once a problem was solved in principle he abandoned the unfinished work of art for the next intellectual challenge. It remained for Michelangelo, artist and poet, to produce a large enough body of work in both painting and sculpture to adequately support the nickname given to him by his contemporaries, Il Divino. Michelangelo Buonarroti was born in 1475, in Tuscany, in the small town of Caprese. The family soon moved to Florence where they owned a good-sized farm not far from the marble quarries. Despite his father's protests, Michelangelo apprenticed himself to the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. Through a distant family relation, he was placed in the Medici entourage and there he obtained a humanist education, including some knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, Dante, and Petrarch. Much of what we know about his early life comes from his autobiography, written with the assistance of Giorgio Vasari, a more than competent artist who authored the first great collection of artistic biographies. According to Vasari (1511–1574), who would have known about these matters since he was nine when Raphael died and outlived Michelangelo by ten years, the young Michelangelo began to do anatomical dissections at age 18 in the Monastery of Santo Spirito in Florence (7); these dissections would later influence the content and manner of his paintings and serve as the source material for the hidden symbols he may have inserted into the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo moved to Rome when he was 22 and was able to study the antiquities in the collection of Cardinal Riacio; this experience confirmed him in his artistic ambition and led to some of his first triumphs. He returned to Florence, where for eight years he competed with his only true rival, Leonardo, for multiple commissions and, after the creation of his "David," (1504) was often recalled to Rome for special projects. It was in 1508 that Pope Julius II gave him the assignment to paint the Sistine Chapel. It was a strange request since the artist saw himself as a sculptor of marble first and lamented that he was not much of a painter. In 1512, at the age of 37, Michelangelo completed what is widely considered the greatest unified installation of paintings in Western history.

Michelangelo managed to cover nearly 10,000 square feet of a highly irregular, leaky vault with more than 340 figures while painting on his back and by candlelight. The Creation of Adam is the most iconic section of the great ceiling and is one of the world’s most reproduced paintings. Adam is depicted as receiving the gift of life from the athletic and muscular (i.e. indestructible) God of the Hebrew Bible (or is it Jupiter?) as if an electric spark were jumping the gap between their outstretched fingertips. God the Father and his attendant angels are seen against a billowing cloth as if God were acting from within a whirlwind. In the conventional interpretation of this tapestry, the Eternal is circumscribed not by a brain but by an ellipse (symbolizing the ‘cosmic egg’) composed of his celestial mantle and angelic spirits, while Adam forms only an incomplete oval. In this painting, Michelangelo conjures the Biblical narrative of man, having been created in the image of God, with the Platonic concept by which ideal beauty mirrored on earth paradoxically frees the spirit from material bondage (1). Though the sexual allure of Adam’s beauty has been discussed within the context of Michelangelo’s homosexuality, a practice to which he was introduced in the court of Lorenzo de Medici, it is easy to see that the perfection and accuracy of Adam’s face and body are largely determined by Greek idealism and the knowledge Michelangelo gained from anatomical dissections.

Over the centuries, interpretations of the great painting have
something the mind already knows. This facility in finding patterns is thus a metaphor-making machine.

The creation of life into Adam or is God a concept in Adam’s mind? The notion of the mind as a truly human property and its centrality in Renaissance thought are critical to any modern interpretation. Though Adam is a perfect physical specimen, his facial expression is bland, and he raises his hand in a listless manner (2). Since Adam is clearly alive at the time that his fingertips almost touches that of God—he is fully formed and his eyes are open—is God merely breathing life into Adam or is he transferring the state of consciousness that makes a truly human life possible? Furthermore, God’s left arm encircles a beautiful female figure that has intrigued commentators from the beginning; variously interpreted as the uncreated Eve, or Sophia, the goddess of divine wisdom. In some Christian traditions, Sophia is seen as the grandmother of Jehovah or even the bride of God. Sophia appears in the Song of Songs and corresponds to the feminine side of God in Cabalist philosophy. This conjecture was but a step away from the astonishing suggestion made in 1990 by a medical student, FL Meshberger, that the drapery containing God and his attendants is actually a depiction of the human brain (5), a coded reference that the divine gift humans receive from God is not only supported by Michelangelo’s own anatomical dissections. Of course, a cynic might suppose that neurologists and nephrologists are prone to discover brains and kidneys everywhere. In the case of *The Creation of Adam*, the possibly intentional resemblance of the draperies to the brain is not only supported by Michelangelo’s own anatomy, but by his interpretation of Platonic philosophy and the appropriateness of the brain as a symbol of the major theme of the painting, the nature of the divine gift that makes us truly human.

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REFERENCES