THE CREATION OF ADAM BY MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI (1475-1564)

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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 Tinteretto 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...
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 conjoins 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 undergone tremendous change. For example, given the similarity between the faces of God and Adam, it's not even clear as to who is creating whom; is God breathing life into Adam or is God a concept in Adam's mind? The notion of the mind as a uniquely 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 fingertip 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 Cabalistic 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 merely life but the intellect (6); locating Sophia at the very center of the brain seems to make eminent sense. Once our own brains are alerted to this possibility, it is not difficult to assemble the appropriate clues to identify the frontal and temporal poles in the drapery to the left of God's right hand, the Rolandic sulcus above and behind his head, and the backs and legs of two angels seen from behind as the pituitary stalk, pons, and spinal cord hanging just below God's right thigh. The problem with this interpretation is the well-known property of our visual systems to fill in details and create meaning where no pattern or meaning may have been intended. As the great Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning has said, there is no picture so abstract that it does not contain a resemblance to something the mind already knows. This facility in finding patterns is related to the brain's gift for metaphorical association; indeed, the brain has been called a metaphor-making machine.
On the other hand, the rills and ridges within the concave folds of the drapery strongly resemble the “greenstick” dissection many of us made as medical students in fresh brains by the simple expedient of scratching the inner aspect of a hemisphere with a dull wooden probe, thus uncovering horizontal association fibers or such projection systems as the optic radiations—a technique certainly available to Michelangelo in Renaissance Italy. Furthermore, several other statues and paintings by Michelangelo seem to contain distinct medical references (6). A striking example is the mantle of the Creator in The Separation of the Land and Water, a Sistine fresco immediately adjacent to The Creation of Adam, recently identified by nephrologists as a bisected right kidney (2). 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 history of anatomical dissection 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