

**Giorgio Vasari, "Michel Angelo and the Sistine Chapel," from *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Writers, and Architects* (1568)**

Text courtesy for the Internet Modern History Sourcebook

When the Pope was returned to Rome, Bramante (a friend of Raffaello's, and therefore little a friend to Michael Angelo) tried to turn his mind from finishing his sepulchre, saying it was an evil augury and seemed like hastening his death to make his own grave; and he persuaded him that on Michael Angelo's return he should set him to paint the ceiling of the chapel in the palace, in memory of Sixtus his uncle. For Bramante and Michael Angelo's other rivals thought to draw him away from sculpture, in which they saw he was perfect, and make him produce less worthy works, not to be compared with Raffaello's, knowing he had had no experience in painting in fresco. So when he was returned and proposed to the Pope to finish his tomb, he desired him instead to paint the ceiling of the chapel. Michael Angelo sought in every way to shift the load off his back, proposing Raffaello instead. But the more he excused himself, the more impetuous the Pope became. So seeing that his Holiness persevered, he resolved to do it, and the Pope ordered Bramante to make the scaffold. He made it hanging by ropes passed through holes in the ceiling, which when Michael Angelo saw, he asked Bramante how the holes were to be stopped up when the painting was finished. He answered, "We must think of that afterwards, but there is no other way." So Michael Angelo knew that either Bramante was worth little or that he was no friend to him, and he went to the Pope and told him the scaffolding would not do. So he told him to do it his own way. He therefore ordered it to be made on supports, not touching the wall, and he gave to a poor carpenter who made it so many of the useless ropes that by the sale of them he obtained a dowry for one of his daughters.

The Pope having resolved that the pictures which had been painted there by the masters before him in the time of Sixtus should be destroyed, Michael Angelo was forced by the greatness of the undertaking to ask aid, and sent to Florence for men. And having begun and finished the cartoons, and never having coloured before in fresco, he brought from Florence some of his friends to aid him, and that he might see their method of working in freseo, among whom were Granacci, Bugiarini, and others. So he set them to begin the work, but their efforts being far from satisfying him, one morning he resolved to destroy all that they had done, and shutting himself up in the chapel, would not open the door for them, nor show himself to them at home. They therefore, after this had gone on some time, were offended, and took leave and went back to Florence with shame. Then Michael Angelo prepared to do the whole work himself, and brought it to a successful termination with great labour and study, nor would he let any one see it, by which means the desire grew strong in all. When the half was done and uncovered, all Rome went to see it, the Pope the first; and Raffaello

da Urbino, who was excellent in imitating, having seen it, changed his manner. Then Bramante sought to persuade the Pope to give the other half to Raffaello. But the Pope, seeing every day the powers of Michael Angelo, judged that he should finish the other half. So he brought it to an end in twenty months by himself without even the help of a man to grind the colours. Michael Angelo complained that from the haste of the Pope he could not finish it as he would, for the Pope constantly asked him when it would be finished. Once he answered, "It will be finished when I have satisfied myself." "But we will," replied the Popes "that you should satisfy us in our desire to have it quickly." And he added that if it was not done soon he would have him thrown from his scaffold. The Pope used often to tell Michael Angelo to make the chapel rich in colour and gold, but Michael Angelo would answer the Holy Father, "In those times men did not wear gold, and those whom I am painting were never very rich, but holy men despising riches."

The work was done in great discomfort from constantly looking up, and it so injured his sight that he could only read or look at drawings in the same position, an effect which lasted many months. But in the ardour of labour he felt no fatigue and cared for no discomfort. The work has been, indeed, a light of our art, illuminating the world which had been so many centuries in darkness. Oh, truly happy age, and oh, blessed artists, who at such a fountain can purge away the dark films from your eyes. Give thanks to Heaven, and imitate Michael Angelo in all things.

So when it was uncovered every one from every part ran to see it, and gazed in silent astonishment; and the Pope, inspired by it and encouraged to greater undertakings, rewarded him liberally with money and rich gifts. The great favours that the Pope showed him proved that he recognised his talents, and if sometimes he did him an injury, he healed it with gifts and signal favours; as when, for instance, Michael Angelo once asked leave of him to go to work in S. Giovanni in Florence, and requested money for the purpose, and he said, "Well, and this chapel, when will it be finished?" "When I can, Holy Father." The Pope having a stick in his hand struck Michael Angelo, saying, "When I can! when I can! I will make you finish it!" Michael Angelo therefore returned to his house and prepared to leave for Florence, but the Pope in haste sent his chamberlain after him with five hundred crowns to pacify him, and ordered him to make his excuses and say it was all done in love and kindness. And he, seeing it was the nature of the Pope and really loving him, took it in good part and laughed at it, finding also that it turned to his profit, for the Pope would do anything to keep him his friend.