

**RENAISSANCE ROME:
MICHELANGELO:
SISTINE CHAPEL
CEILING**



RENAISSANCE ROME: MICHELANGELO: SISTINE CHAPEL CEILING

Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo's place in Renaissance art, how his famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were created, and why those same frescoes are considered by many to be the very personification of Renaissance art itself.

Subjects

Art
Art History
European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- [Sistine Chapel, Vatican](#)

Essential Questions

- Who was Michelangelo?
- What was Michelangelo's place in 15th century Renaissance art?
- Why was Michelangelo given the commission for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Did he want the job? Why did he accept it? What story do the frescoes tell?
- Why are Michelangelo's famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel important to understanding the development of Renaissance art in Rome?

Academic Summary

... he accommodated the compartments to the figures rather than the figures to the compartments, being satisfied to execute those figures, both the nude and the draped, with the perfection of design, so that another such work has never been and never can be done, and it is scarcely possible even to imitate his achievement. This work, in truth, has been and still is the lamp of our art, and has bestowed such benefits and shed so much light on the art of painting that it has served to illuminate a world that had lain in darkness for so many hundreds of years. And it is certain that no man who is a painter need think any more to see new inventions, attitudes, and draperies for the clothing of figures, novel manners of expression, and things painted with greater variety and force, because he gave to this work all the perfection that can be given to any work executed in such a field of art.

In order to display the perfection of art and also the greatness of God, he painted in a scene God dividing Light from Darkness, wherein may be seen His Majesty as He rests self-sustained with the arms outstretched, and reveals both love and power. In the second scene he depicted with most beautiful judgment and genius the creating the Sun and Moon, in which He is supported by many little Angels, in an attitude sublime and terrible by reason of the foreshortenings in the arms and legs. In the same scene Michelangelo depicted Him after the Blessing of the Earth and the Creation of the Animals, when He is seen on that vaulting as a figure flying in foreshortening; and wherever you go throughout the chapel, it turns constantly and faces in every direction. So, also, in the next scene, where He is dividing the Water from the Earth; and both these are very beautiful figures and refinements of genius such as could be produced only by the divine hands of Michelangelo. He then went on, beyond that scene, to the Creation of Adam, wherein he figured God as borne by a group of nude Angels of tender age, which appear to be supporting not one figure only, but the whole weight of the world; this effect being produced by the venerable majesty of His form and by the manner of the movement with which He embraces some of the little Angels with one arm, as if to support Himself, and with the other extends the right hand towards Adam, a figure of such a kind in its beauty, in the attitude, and in the outlines, that it appears as if newly fashioned by the first and supreme Creator rather than by the brush and design of a mortal man. Beyond this, in another scene, he made God taking our mother Eve from Adam's side, in which may be seen those two nude figures, one as if were dead from his being the thrall of sleep, and the other become alive and filled with animation by the blessing of God. Very clearly do we see from the brush of this most gifted craftsman the difference that there is between sleep and wakefulness, and how firm and stable, speaking humanly, the Divine Majesty may appear.

It would take too long to describe all the beautiful fantasies in the different actions in the part where there is all the Genealogy of the Fathers, beginning with the sons of Noah, to demonstrate the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, in which figures is a variety of things that it is not possible to enumerate, such as draperies, expressions of heads, and an infinite number of novel and extraordinary fancies, all most beautifully considered. Nothing there but is carried into execution with genius: all the figures there are masterly and most beautifully foreshortened, and everything that you look at is divine and beyond praise. And who will not be struck dumb with admiration at the sight of the sublime force of Jonas, the last figure in the chapel, wherein by the power of art the vaulting, which in fact springs forward in accord with the curve of the masonry, yet, being in appearance pushed back by that figure, which bends inwards, seems as if straight, and, vanquished by the art of design with its lights and shades, even appears in truth to recede inwards? Oh, truly happy age of ours, and truly blessed craftsmen! Well may you be called so, seeing that in our time you have been able to illumine anew

in such a fount of light the darkened sight of your eyes, and to see all that was difficult made smooth by a master so marvelous and so unrivalled! Certainly the glory of his labors makes you known and honored, in that he has stripped from you that veil which you had over the eyes of your minds, which were so full of darkness, and has delivered the truth from the falsehood that overshadowed your intellects. Thank Heaven, therefore, for this, and strive to imitate Michelangelo in everything.

Excerpts from Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists: Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling, 16th century

Born Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni in Caprese (about 100 km east of Florence) in 1475, Michelangelo spent much of his youth in a small village just outside of Florence in the home of a stonecutter who worked for his father in a marble quarry. According to the artist himself, at an early age he was “handling chisel and hammer, with which I make my figures.” By age 13, Michelangelo was an apprentice working for Domenico Ghirlandaio in Florence, who quickly saw that the young man had been blessed with immense talent. By the time he reached the age of twenty, Michelangelo’s body of work was getting recognition around Italy, to the point where even his contemporaries began referring to him as “Il Divino” (The Divine). Over the remainder of his life, he would work all over the Italian peninsula creating many of the most famous artistic works of the Renaissance, including working in Rome for different popes creating artistic pieces that today symbolize the Renaissance itself. Although it is difficult to say that any one of his masterpieces is greater than another, his most famous work is unquestionably the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The Sistine Chapel was designed and built for Pope Sixtus IV (after whom the chapel is named) between 1473 and 1480 as an official chapel of the Papal Court. In 1508, Pope Julius II (Sixtus IV’s nephew) commissioned (perhaps ordered) then 33-year-old Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the chapel (the walls had been done years earlier by other artists). According to multiple 16th century sources, the great artist didn’t want the work. He was already working on sculptures for Julius II’s tomb (something he would ultimately work on until 1545 – 30 years after Julius II’s death, and the pope isn’t even buried in it). Michelangelo also believed he was a sculptor, not a painter, and therefore he initially refused the pope’s “request.” He eventually relented when Julius agreed to allow the artist to do as he pleased with the design.

It took four years to complete the work. In order to reach the ceiling, Michelangelo had a series of scaffolds built. Rather than painting the chapel’s ceiling directly, the artist instead worked in fresco, an old Roman technique he learned as a young apprentice in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s workshop (one of Ghirlandaio’s frescoes, Vocation of the Apostles, adorns the wall of the chapel). When painting a fresco, where fresh plaster is first applied to a surface and paint is then applied directly to the plaster. As everything dries, the paint literally seeps into the plaster, thus becoming part of the wall (or in this case, ceiling).

The main part of the ceiling is a series of nine frescoes from the Book of Genesis. They start with God dividing light and darkness, move on to the creation sun and the earth. Eventually, the frescoes move on through the story of man’s creation, the downfall of Eden and the stories of Noah. The most famous and well-known panel in the series sits right in the center of the chapel. Commonly known as the Creation of Adam, it shows God reaching down from Heaven to give Adam the “divine spark” of life.

Any study or analysis of Renaissance art necessitates studying the great artists of the time, and it is natural for many students to be drawn to Leonardo, Raphael, Brunelleschi and others, but the conversation eventually and inexorably turns to

Michelangelo. Even in his own lifetime, he was seen by his contemporaries as the paramount sculptor and artist of the time period, earning the nickname of the “divine one.” He was a prolific artist, and Italy is littered with his sculptures and paintings from the Milan to Rome. Today, there are major works from the artist across Europe in such places as Paris and St. Petersburg. Perhaps the most important of those works are the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. After he died, Michelangelo’s art went on to inspire later generations of artists for centuries to come. It might even be argued that without “Il Divino”, there would have been no Renaissance. Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo’s place in Renaissance art, how his famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were created, and why those same frescoes are considered by many to be the very personification of Renaissance art itself.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo’s place in Renaissance society in terms of his own artistic creations, focusing on why he was called “il Divino” (the Divine One) by contemporaries in his lifetime.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Michelangelo’s famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were created, and why those same frescoes are considered by many to be the very personification of Renaissance art itself.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Who is the most famous artist of all time? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Michelangelo (20 min)
- Video – Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Ceiling (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel ceiling. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students might also study the walls of the chapel and the artists who painted them. Did any of these artists influence Michelangelo in his work? If so, how?
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was Michelangelo's place in Renaissance society? How and why was the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel painted? Why are Michelangelo's frescoes considered by many to be the very personification of Renaissance art itself? (30 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Michelangelo's place in Renaissance art, how his famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were created, and why those same frescoes are considered by many to be the very personification of Renaissance art itself.

Extension

On tour: Sistine Chapel, Vatican

While on tour, students at the Vatican will visit the Sistine Chapel as part of their tour, where they can see for themselves Michelangelo's masterpiece. No matter how many times people see it, the images still bring wonder and awe. In the 1980s, the Vatican undertook a massive cleaning and restoration project on the chapel's frescoes. When the grime was removed, the world was stunned at Michelangelo's use of bright colors and his dedication to minute details, many of which had been obscured over the previous 500 years. Students with a keen eye will notice a couple of small patches where the ceiling was left unrestored as a reminder of what it looked like before the restorers finished their work. Be advised, no cameras are allowed inside the chapel. Also, please tell students to remember that the Sistine chapel is still a chapel. Two guards stand up by the altar loudly repeating "silenzio" (Italian for "silence"), reminding visitors to be quiet while in the chapel (at times a difficult task due to the size of the crowds).

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariMichelangelo5.html
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Michelangelo: Part 5: the Sistine Chapel (primary source)
- mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/CSN/CSN_Volta.html
Sistine Chapel: Ceiling (website) – from the Vatican official website
- vatican.com/tour/sistine_chapel_3D
Sistine Chapel 3D Tour (website). Outstanding, interactive 3-D tour of the Sistine Chapel. Highly recommended for all teachers and students.
- www.michelangelo-gallery.com/the-sistine-chapel-ceiling.aspx
Michelangelo's Gallery: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling (website)
- www.italian-renaissance-art.com/Sistine-Ceiling.html
The Sistine Ceiling: Michelangelo's Masterpiece (website). This website does a good job of explaining each of the nine central panels, and has great images. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.fischerarthistory.com/sistine-chapel.html
Restoration of the Sistine Chapel (website). Discusses the restoration project undertaken by the Vatican in the 1980s
- fusion.net/abc_univision/news/story/mexican-michelangelo-replicates-sistine-chapel-hometown-17822
Modern Day Michelangelo Replicates Sistine Chapel in his Hometown (website / video). From Fusion TV and ABC Univision Communications. Tells the story of 68-year-old Miguel Macias, a retired graphic designer in Mexico City, who has been working for over 12 years in his neighborhood church creating a reproduction of Michelangelo's famous ceiling.
- fieldartdiscovery.com/michelangelo.ppt
Michelangelo (PowerPoint)
- www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/mich-sistine.ppt
Sistine Chapel Images (PowerPoint). From Professor David Banach, Department of Philosophy at St. Anselm College (NH).
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSve55sBZLg
Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel (video). Lecture w/ PowerPoint from Kenney Mencher, Art Professor at Ohlone College (CA).
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZI_QubsqWU
The Sistine Restored (video). In-depth discussion on the restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes. At 50 minutes, this video is probably too long to show in most classes, but is valuable for students to see on their own. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8ChAfzWaYg (part 1)
The Divine Michelangelo – Part One (video) – This BBC documentary (2 hours long for both parts) is highly recommended as an out-of-class activity for all students and teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGa_2L76J3c (part 2)
The Divine Michelangelo – Part Two (video) – This BBC documentary (2 hours long for both parts) is highly recommended as an out-of-class activity for all students and teachers.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo
Michelangelo – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sistine_Chapel_ceiling
Sistine Chapel Ceiling – Wikipedia article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/the_vatican
On the Road: The Vatican – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens
Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

Key Terms

- Fresco
- Julius II
- Michelangelo
- Renaissance
- Sistine Chapel

