

# Book Review of *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* by Ross King

By: Caitlin Turbeville

The biographies composed during the Renaissance by Ascanio Condivi, and Giorgio Vasari on Michelangelo titled the *Life of Michelangelo* and *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* both capture and began the myths and stories that have been synonymous with Michelangelo for centuries. Ross King addresses one of these widespread beliefs that Michelangelo worked and lived in isolation and alone without a circle of people influencing and aiding him in his significant artistic journeys in *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*. King introduces the reader to a unique perspective on Michelangelo's life by looking at his connections to the people around him. While Michelangelo was not nearly as social as his contemporary Raphael, who was notorious for his loud and outgoing personality, he did not work alone on projects, nor did he isolate himself from people entirely. Artistically, Michelangelo never completed his works alone, especially the Sistine Chapel, which, thanks to Condivi and Vasari, it is a universal assumption. Ross King effectively demonstrates that Michelangelo was not alone during his completion of the Sistine Chapel physically or socially. Indeed, Michelangelo was surrounded by a network of interested parties—his family, friends, enemies, and assistants.

Michelangelo's family had an immense impact on his life, which would influence his art. While not a social being, Michelangelo kept close contact with his family throughout his life, and their relationship would bleed into the most famous pieces from his career. The rocky relationship Michelangelo had with his family can be seen in the Sistine Chapel. King mentions that "as a man obsessed with his family tree" and their status, Michelangelo painted the ancestors of Christ in a way that was very similar to how he felt about them in the Sistine Chapel.<sup>1</sup> Michelangelo portrayed the family of Christ as "miserable and unruly," thereby showing his "discontentment and frustration with his own rather unhappy family."<sup>2</sup>

Ross King demonstrates the vital role Michelangelo's allies and companions played in his career. Michelangelo had an inner circle of trusted confidants that would influence the creation of his Sistine Chapel. King often references Condivi and Vasari and confirms that these men were Michelangelo's friends, who appreciated his skill and talent. These feelings are reflected in their biographies of Michelangelo, which cemented his enduring fame. They elevated Michelangelo as the sole contributor in

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<sup>1</sup> King, Ross. *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2003, pp. 130.

<sup>2</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 133-134.

completing the Sistine Chapel.<sup>3</sup> Vasari and Condivi present Michelangelo as a heroic character who continually overcame struggles. King also references Cardinal Alidosi as a man who helped Michelangelo in Rome during the years he struggled with Pope Julius II. Cardinal Alidosi influenced Michelangelo's career and was a man Michelangelo regarded as a "protector and ally in the treacherous world of Vatican politics."<sup>4</sup> Alidosi defended Michelangelo to the Pope many times, becoming a trusted member in Michelangelo's circle.

Contrary to popular belief, Michelangelo had a team of assistants that were the hands behind the Sistine Chapel's physical completion. These assistants aided in building the scaffold, the plastering, the creation of pigments, and the piece's overall frescoing. The "extremely dubious" work of grounding pigments for the fresco was work that "always called for several hands."<sup>5</sup> Michelangelo needed his assistants' advice and expertise on the fresco since years had passed from when he had practiced and learned the skill.<sup>6</sup> In *The Creation of Eve*, the medallions that adorned the piece "were left almost entirely to the assistants."<sup>7</sup>

Giuliano de Sangallo and Piero Rosselli, who were close friends of Michelangelo, both had roles to play in the Sistine Chapel's renovation. Sangallo saw the chapel's architectural issues and corrected them while Rosselli completed the scaffold and the plastering.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these two men, Francesco Granacci was Michelangelo's second in command to fulfilling the Sistine Chapel's fresco.<sup>9</sup> Michelangelo "respected Granacci's opinions more than anyone else's."<sup>10</sup> Vasari even stated that "there was no one more willing to confer with touching his works or to share all that he knew of art at that time."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the assistants of Michelangelo played an essential role in the physical completion of the Sistine Chapel.

King also discusses Michelangelo's enemies and the impact they had on him throughout his career. His biggest enemy would be the church authorities, who hindered his artistic ability. Giovanni Rafanelli, the Master of the Sacred Place, needed to approve any work Michelangelo had planned.<sup>12</sup> Michelangelo's most significant controller would be Pope Julius II, who commissioned the Sistine Chapel.<sup>13</sup> From Michelangelo's perspective, Julius tormented him since he left Rome after a bitter falling

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<sup>3</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 318.

<sup>4</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 84-85, 125.

<sup>7</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 202.

<sup>8</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 20, 51-52.

<sup>9</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 45.

out from the cease of work on the tomb for Julius.<sup>14</sup> However, Julius did have the most significant impact on Michelangelo because he commissioned the works that would create fame for the remembered Renaissance artist.

Ross King is a Canadian writer and historian. He has written numerous bestseller historical fiction and non-fiction novels on the Renaissance period. King received a Ph.D. from York University and currently continues his post-doctoral research in England. His writing style is easy to follow, especially for a person who has no previous experience with Renaissance history. King deftly navigates art, religion, and the Renaissance while communicating Michelangelo's various trials and achievements. The reader is introduced to Michelangelo's struggle with his family that can be relatable to this day with most people. King makes it effortless to feel a personal connection to Michelangelo by, for example, including quotes about his thoughts on suicide and focusing on his life outside of the artwork we know and love.<sup>15</sup>

*Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* is undoubtedly convincing. The author continually uses primary source information and even debunks biographies written about Michelangelo from his own time. The use of letters as pieces of evidence secured a factual timeline on Michelangelo's life and location during specific periods, and these also described his news and thoughts. In addition to this, the constant reference to Condivi and Vasari and the author's recognition of these texts' inaccuracy allowed us into what Michelangelo's life was to his close companions. King's piece sufficiently demonstrates his thesis through Michelangelo's letters to his friends, family, assistants, and church officials and the use of Condivi and Vasari's biographies.

Ross King addresses the previous myths that have been synonymous with Michelangelo. The image of Charlton Heston in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* on his back, fulfilling the Pope's wish of the Sistine Chapel alone, is farfetched. King shows the readers that Michelangelo, while non-social in ways, had a team of influencers and helpers both aiding in his artistic journey mentally, physically, and socially whether it be friends, family, enemies, or assistants.

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<sup>14</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> King, *Michelangelo*, 284.