

Interest in the restoration of Michelangelo's work, carried out between 1980 and 1994, is obviously understandable, as well as being an absolute truth.

In describing the intervention, the author's involvement, participation and what it meant for him, not only in technical terms, but particularly in the intimate relationship with the work and the artist's sublime expression, I felt, indirectly, how and to what extent this kind of personal attachment can lead to a result that is unique in its excellence, even in the adverse situations and conditions created by an insistent opposition.

This is what Gianluigi Colalucci and those who participated in the restoration of the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel experienced. Hence the need, through the publication of the work in the Journal, to testify to the "motus animi atque corporis" that has marked the relationship between the restoration and the work and is expressed in the title: "Michelangelo and I".

Editor-in-Chief

MICHELANGELO AND I

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In 2013, after a trip to Georgia, stimulated by the young minister of culture of the country, I began writing a book in which I brought together the memories, feelings, and the opposition and satisfaction I experienced in the fourteen long years spent in the Sistine Chapel restoring Michelangelo's frescoes.

At the time, nineteen years had passed since the completion of the restoration, but interest in the work and above all in the unknown Michelangelo that the restoration had revealed, was still very high throughout the world. I had noticed, however, that some of the misconceptions that had accompanied my work persisted, despite the fact that Fabrizio Mancinelli, the art historian in charge of the restoration, and Nazzareno Gabrielli and myself, who were in charge of the scientific research on Michelangelo, had written a great many essays and articles that provided precise information about the work carried out in the Sistine Chapel [1].

This last observation encouraged me to ponder the situation and to start writing again about the restoration and Michelangelo, but this time, in a way, that for me, was completely new.

I wanted the book to be enjoyable and easy to read, as if it were a long narrative that springs from personal memories and my close and very personal relationship with the painting of the Great Master. I therefore excluded any reference to restoration techniques preferring instead to convey a picture of Michelangelo's extraordinary frescoes.

It was my desire to transmit to others the essence of Michelangelo's painting, having had the privilege to work face to face with his masterpiece for many years and of which I knew every square inch by heart (Figure 1).

Preparing the book for publication and having to obtain permission from the Vatican Museums to publish some photos of the Sistine Chapel, I invited Antonio Paolucci, an important art historian and the then director of the Museums, to read the manuscript. Without hesitating, he decided there and then that the book would be published by the Vatican Museums (Edizioni Musei Vaticani) and *24 Ore Cultura*. The original book, in Italian, was entitled "*Io e Michelangelo*" (Figure 2) and was published in December 2015, as well as in Spanish and in English (in 2016).

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Figure 1. Sistine Chapel, vault; cleaning the scene of the “Separation of light from darkness”.

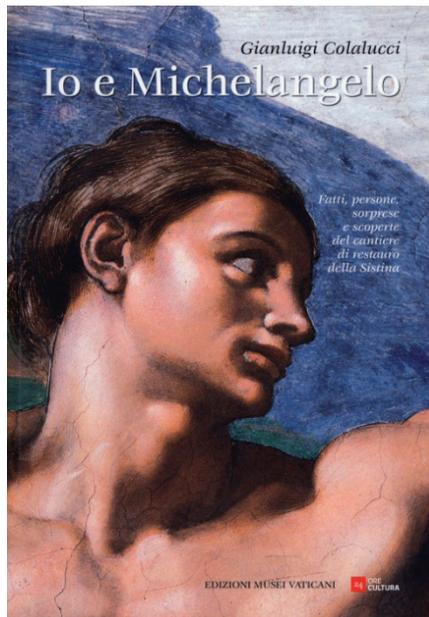


Figure 2. Cover of the book “Io e Michelangelo”

After an initial presentation at the Municipality of Foligno (Umbria, Italy), the book was presented in Rome on March 17, 2017, at the Accademia di San Luca. The great conference hall of the Academy was packed with people which meant that many of them standing in the corridor had to be content to listen through the open doorway.

The President of the Academy, Gianni Dessi, had invited several personalities to

speak: in the field of art history, Antonio Paolucci and Bruno Toscano from the University of Rome; in the field of television journalism, Nino Criscenti from the Italian TV network, RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana).

Antonio Paolucci, a great admirer of my book, in his presentation, highlighted some of the phrases in which I expressed the anguish that took hold of me in the moments before cleaning the pieces of the painting considered to be at the apex of the art world, to emphasize an aspect that is often neglected: "the solitude of the restorer".

One such moment was during the cleaning of Adam's face (Figure 3a and b) in the scene of the creation of man, at the center of the vault in the Sistine Chapel. While working on the most famous piece of painting in the world and also the most beautiful - beautiful even under the deposits of dust and grease from candle smoke and braziers, as well as layers of altered animal glue - led me to reflect seriously and deeply on the immense responsibility that I myself had assumed and that any restorer has, not only towards the whole world, but also towards a work of art and ultimately towards one's own conscience.

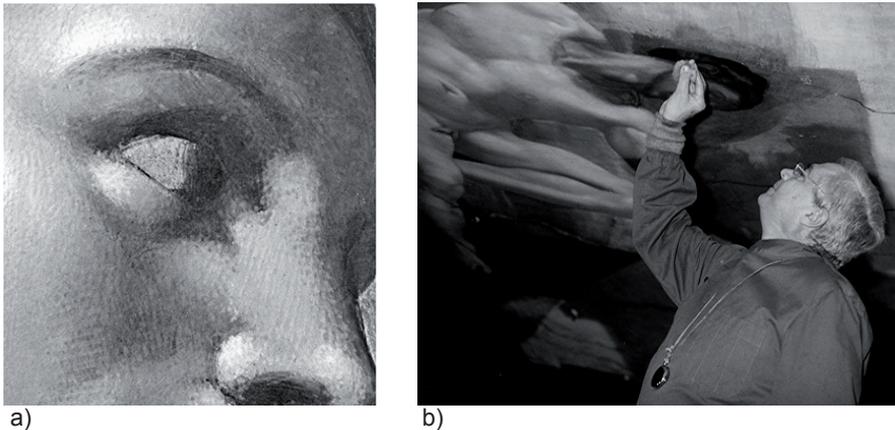


Figure 3. Sistine Chapel, vault: a) detail of Adam's face in the *Creation of man*; b) cleaning Adam's head in the *Creation of man*.

It was after a few years into the restoration that I again had to face a very difficult moment: the cleaning of the head of Christ the Judge in the *Last Judgment* (or the *Final Judgment*). This part of the painting, just like the head of Adam and many other parts of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine, is one of the most renowned works of art world-wide.

When I started the restoration work on this important masterpiece I was aware of the responsibility that I was taking on, but I was also aware of possessing the preparation, know-how, experience and the most up-to-date technical means that made me feel confident I was approaching it in the right way.

However there is no restoration without risk. Risks can be calculated, reduced to a minimum, but they remain.

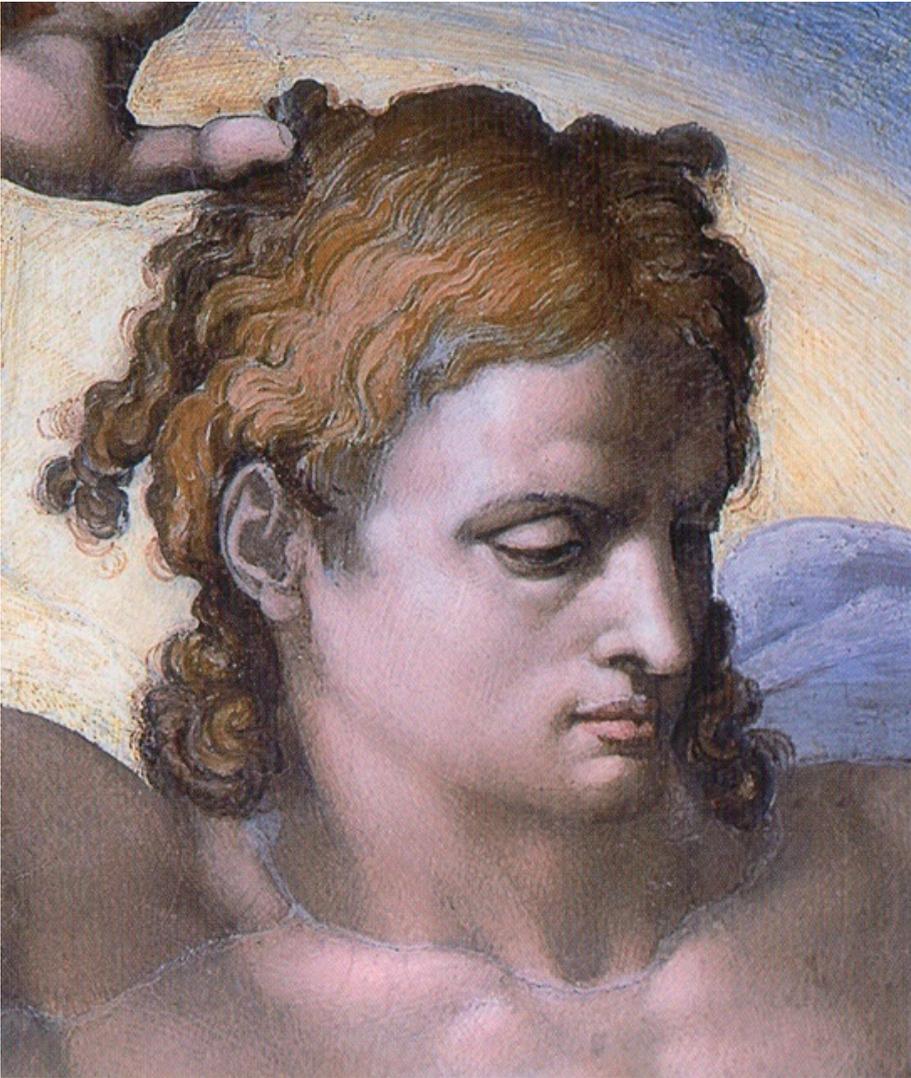


Figure 4. Sistine Chapel, Final Judgment, the head of Christ the Judge after the cleaning. Detail taken from the book "Io e Michelangelo".

When you have to work on surfaces, even small ones, where you dare not take any risks, your conscience comes into play. It is in this particular situation that Antonio Paolucci sees the solitude of the restorer because before our own conscience each of us is alone.

When, at the end of this long restoration, which lasted fourteen years (1980-1994), I had to face the task of cleaning the head of Christ the Judge (Figure 4), I began to carefully study each detail of the face. In doing so, I realized that the right eye, the one that

is visible and forcefully expresses the gaze of a supreme judge, an extremely severe judge, had been painted by Michelangelo using three short overlapping brushstrokes of very dark brown ocher. The look around which the composition of the *Last Judgment* revolves, therefore, arises from only three short horizontal strokes. When I realized this, when I understood that even the slightest damage to one of the three brushstrokes would have changed that look, a moment of panic seized me. I was afraid [2].

Before actually touching Christ's eye to start the task, I thought about it for days – for a long time - then I gathered together all my technical and moral strength and dealt with the cleaning which, of course, went very well.

Instead, on the same occasion of the book presentation at the Accademia di S. Luca, Bruno Toscano spoke of the conceptual differences expressed by Cesare Brandi and Roberto Longhi on modern restoration; an immensely interesting topic that is fundamental in the study of the history of restoration. He stated that according to Longhi, the work of art had, above all, to be considered from an aesthetic point of view, deciding for each single piece the most appropriate steps to take for its restoration. At a later date, during his appointment as director of the Central Institute of Restoration in Rome, Brandi formulated his philosophy on restoration (1950), which was published under the title "*Theory of Restoration*". His theory became well-established in Italy and has since gained ground in many other European countries [3].

As one of Cesare Brandi's students at the Central Institute of Restoration, I have always used this 'theory' as my reference point and it was no different for the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. This strictly scientific approach, attentive to the history of the work, respectful of the changes that time may possibly have had on the original work, was even more rigorous in the recovery of the original work and left no room for arbitrary decisions or empirical techniques (Figure 5).

The journalist, Nino Criscenti, presented a selection of excerpts from the three long documentaries produced for the RAI filmed at three different moments of the restoration [4]. The most prominent figures from the world of art history at that time had been invited - André Chastel and Ernst H. Gombrich (Figure 6).

The first documentary was shot in 1984 and recorded the restoration of the lunettes; the second was made four years later on the restoration of the vault and the final one filmed the restoration of the *Last Judgment*.

Criscenti also read some passages taken from my book. As I listened to his reading of the words I had written, magnificently rendered with great pathos, just as a consummate actor would, I felt as if I were reliving those moments; and seeing those early scenes during the restoration of the lunettes, I was greatly moved (Figure 7)



Figure 5. Sistine Chapel, the Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II for the end of the restoration. In the background, the Last Judgment.



Figure 6. Ernst H. Gombrich (centre) visits the Sistine Chapel during the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes, with Fabrizio Mancinelli (right) and Gianluigi Colalucci (left).



Figure 7. Sistine Chapel, cleaning the first lunette: Eleazar-Mathan.

Besides, in March 2017, I was recovering from a long period of physical problems and surgery, so it was a great effort to actually participate in the presentation. However, when Prof. Dessi asked me to speak to the gathering, I managed to explain the reasons that had led me to write the true story of this restoration with the variations regarding Michelangelo's painting and fresco, without ever falling into the temptation of using technicalities. I talked about the many moments I had experienced during this restoration and the various characters who had visited me on the scaffolding: from royal figures, such as the Emperor of Japan to heads of state, from writers such as Leonardo Sciascia to artists, painters and sculptors, to very singular characters like that of the Italo-American restorer who came from Chicago to offer me \$ 30,000 to allow him to clean the figure of God the Father in the scene of the *Creation of Adam* (Figure 8).

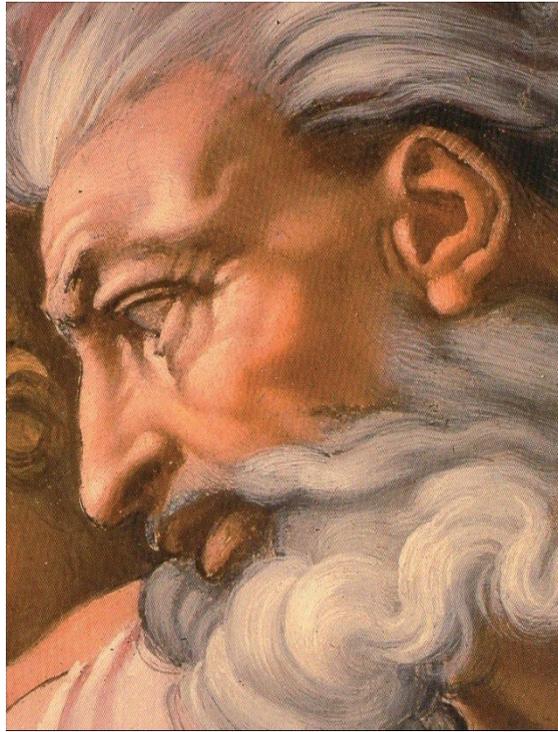


Figure 8. Sistine Chapel, vault, head of God the Father in the Creation of man after cleaning.

There were however many who believed that the restoration was damaging the painting, including the pianist Maurizio Pollini who came to beg me to stop the restoration work that was disfiguring the work of the divine Michelangelo.

The group of critics that was formed during the cleaning of the lunettes never abandoned us. Having to withstand the attacks on our work was very trying but I considered them useful, albeit irrational, because they induced the right amount of tension needed for the long term job, also because it obliged me to verify the validity or otherwise of whatever argument was brought against the restoration. Naturally, I was not alone in taking the responsibility for the work that was done because above everyone was the Director-general of the Vatican Museums, Carlo Pietrangeli and Fabrizio Mancinelli, an art historian and the director of the works (Figure 9).

But it is I who studied the intervention techniques and worked directly on the painting, assisted by three of my restorer colleagues, so it was against my person that the critics spoke out. Many, including several important American, French and German art historians, were in favor of the restoration but were not as loud as those critics who wrote entire books and filled the press with such controversial articles they even touched the conscience of American artists, such as Andy Warhol *in primis* and other "old pop art heroes", as defined by Giuliano Briganti in one of his memorable articles in defence of our work. For a long time, they inundated the Vatican Secretariat of State with postcards in which they strongly insisted on suspending the restoration work [5].

Although understanding those who declared themselves against the restoration because they did not want Michelangelo's pictorial work to be modified by cleaning ("I do not care if the real Michelangelo is this", Pollini told me, "I loved it when it was dirty"), I did not accept the fact that technical, invented or pretentious arguments against the work were put forward without even listening to our reasons and examining all the scientific material that supported us in our work.

Today everyone who visits the Sistine Chapel enjoys the beauty of Michelangelo's colorful frescoes. They were recovered through extremely demanding, long hard work but in return they give us great technical, moral and spiritual enrichment.



Figure 9. Sistine Chapel, vault. Colalucci (standing) during the cleaning of the nearly-touching fingers in the scene of the Creation of man; sitting from left to right are Persegati, Marcinkus, Pietrangeli, Rotondi.

References

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- [2] Colalucci, G., (2015) *Io e Michelangelo.* Milano, Edizioni Musei Vaticani e 24 ore cultura, pp. 208-214.

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- [4] 1984, first RAI documentary on the restoration of the lunettes; 1989, second Rai documentary on the restoration of the vault, by Renato Augias; 1994, third RAI documentary on the restoration of the Judgment, by Piero Badaloni.
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Biographical notes

Gianluigi Colalucci was born in Rome in 1929. In 1953 he obtained his Diploma from the Central Institute of Restoration with Cesare Brandi. In 1960 he joined the Laboratory for the Restoration of Paintings of the Vatican Museums and in 1979 became Chief Restorer. From 1980 -1994 he was the technical manager in the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes and personally carried out the work in the vault and the Last Judgment, in the Sistine Chapel. In 1991 he received a Degree *Honoris causa* in Fine Arts from New York University and in 1995, received a Degree *Honoris Causa* in Conservation and restoration of Cultural Heritage from the Polytechnic University of Valencia. He has restored works by many artists including Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Giotto, Buffalmacco, Caravaggio, Mantegna, Crivelli, Lotto, Cranach, Sartorius, Ferrazzi, Sciltian, Morandi. He has lectured throughout Europe, India, Japan, the United States, Canada, Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Australia. He has published many works on the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes and on the restoration of paintings by other authors.

Summary

On March 17, 2017, Gianluigi Colalucci presented his book entitled "*Io e Michelangelo*" at the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca.

The volume was presented to the many people present by several personalities from the world of art history, such as Prof. Antonio Paolucci and Prof. Bruno Toscano, and from that of journalism, such as Nino Criscenti, who projected excerpts from the documentaries filmed on the scaffolding of the Sistine Chapel during the many years needed to complete the restoration, as well as reading excerpts from the book.

The book's theme is the story of the 14 long years and the memories that Colalucci has of the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes. From the first small cleaning test to the inaugural Mass that Pope John Paul II celebrated in the Chapel to solemnize the end of the restoration.

The speakers emphasized the solitude and great responsibility of the restorer at the critical moments in the work, and the author recalled curious episodes and difficult moments faced in cleaning Adam's head in the *Creation of man* and Christ's head in the *Last Judgment*, among the most exceptional ever painted. There were however also unpleasant moments from those who contested the restoration.

Riassunto

Il 17 marzo del 2017 Gianluigi Colalucci ha presentato all'Accademia Nazionale di San Luca il suo libro intitolato: *Io e Michelangelo*.

Il volume è stato illustrato alle numerosissime persone presenti da alcune personal-

ità del mondo della storia dell'arte, come il Prof. Antonio Paolucci e il Prof. Bruno Toscano, e del giornalismo come Nino Criscenti che ha proiettato brani dei documentari girati sui ponteggi della Cappella Sistina durante i molti anni richiesti dal restauro e ha letto brani tratti dal libro.

Il tema del volume, infatti, consiste nel racconto, lungo 14 anni, dei ricordi che Colalucci ha del restauro degli affreschi di Michelangelo. Dalla piccolissima prima prova di pulitura alla Messa inaugurale che il Papa Giovanni Paolo II celebrò nella Cappella per solennizzare la fine del restauro.

Gli oratori hanno sottolineato la solitudine del restauratore nel momento della sua grande responsabilità, e l'autore ha ricordato episodi curiosi e momenti difficili affrontati nel pulire la testa di Adamo nella Creazione dell'uomo e della testa del Cristo del Giudizio finale, opere tra le più alte mai dipinte. Ma non sono mancati momenti sgradevoli, da parte di coloro che contestavano il restauro.