

Guide to the Sistine Chapel.

In 1475 work was begun on a Papal Chapel in the Vatican Palace commissioned by Sixtus IV and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The building and its decorative scheme were finished by 1483 and opened by the Pope in the August of that year. The structure designed by Baccio Pontelli included a ground floor, a mezzanine and the Chapel itself which had the same dimensions as those attributed in the Bible to the Temple of Solomon 40.32 meters by 13.41 (no apse). The ceiling was barrel vaulted at a height of 20.70 meters and originally painted with gold stars on a blue background. The walls were divided into three horizontal bands, the lowest painted with tromp l'oeil hangings. The central band had frescoes on all four walls and above this were niches between the 28 windows containing painted figures of the first popes.

The iconographic scheme was drawn up by Sixtus and his close friend Bartolomeo Sacchi (known as Platina), the head of the Vatican Library. The cycle of episodes from the lives of Moses and Christ were chosen for a number of reasons. Platina was a humanist scholar with a particular interest in Plutarch's theory of 'parallel lives'; there were, he believed obvious parallels between the life of Moses and that of Christ. In addition the Chapel illustrates two of St Augustine's Three Ages; Before the Law - from Creation to Moses, Under The Law - from Moses to Christ and Under Grace - from Christ onwards. Before the Law was not a part of the original scheme; this was added by Michelangelo working for Sixtus' nephew Julius. The Cycle was also intended to emphasize the superiority of Christianity over Judaism; the Moses cycle is full of acts of violence, the parallel Christ images are not. Finally the iconography was intended to emphasize Papal authority, the popes painted between the windows create an unbroken line from St Peter.

Sixtus required the best painters in Italy to create the scheme, the commission issued in 1481 by Giovanni de Dolci master of works at the Vatican mentions Perugino, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Cosimo Rosselli, in 1482 they were joined by Luca Signorelli who completed the work. Ghirlandaio was the co-ordinator and senior painter, determining which artist should make each scene and, whenever possible its parallel on the opposite wall. The cycle began at the altar end of the Chapel (now the Last Judgment) and had Moses rescued from the Nile to the left of the altar and The Nativity of Christ to the right.

1 South (left) wall. In which Moses meets an angel; The Circumcision of the Second Born Child and Moses bids farewell to his father-in law before setting out for Egypt. (Perugino and Pinturicchio)

1 North (right) wall. The baptism of Christ - Christ gives a sermon - John the Baptist gives a sermon. (Perugino and Pinturicchio)

2 South wall. Seven episodes from the life of Moses - Moses kills an Egyptian and escapes to the land of Midian. Drives away the shepherds who are preventing the daughters of Jethro from drawing water. On Mount Horeb Moses removes his sandals and receives his Mission from the burning bush and leads the Children of Israel from Egypt. (Botticelli)

2 North Wall. The purification of the leper and the temptation of Christ, a complex scene in which the purification is depicted as the Mosaic rite of sacrifice and purification; the priest who witness the scene is Moses; the Temple of Jerusalem in

the picture has the facade of Sixtus' Hospital of Santo Spirito. In the background Christ is led to the desert by angels; the devil tempts him; Christ on the pinnacle of the Temple refuses temptation and the devil plunges into an abyss. (Botticelli)

3 South wall. The Crossing of the Red Sea (Cosimo Rosselli)

3 North wall. The Calling of the First Apostles (Ghirlandaio)

4 South wall. The handing over of the Tablets of the Law the worship of the golden calf, the punishment of the idolators; the return of Moses with the new Tablets (Cosimo Rosselli)

4 North wall The Sermon on the Mount - Christ is shown absorbed in prayer, He descends to the gathering crowd; the healing of a leper is shown on the right. (Cosimo Rosselli)

5 South wall. The Punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. K, D and A deny the authority of Moses and Joshua, K is consumed by fire, D and A are swallowed up by the earth. (Botticelli)

North Wall – no parallel

6 South wall. The Testament and Death of Moses -five episodes; in the foreground Moses reads the testament and gives the Staff of command to Joshua. In the background an angel shows Canaan to Moses, Moses descends the mountain and prepares for death. Mourned by his family he falls asleep on the ground. (Luca Signorelli)

6 North wall Christ delivering the Keys to St Peter - the payment of the tribute money and an attempted stoning of Christ appear in the background. The two figures to the right of the foreground with a set square and sextant are probably the contractor and Baccio Pontelli, the architect of the Sistine. On the triumphal arches are inscriptions comparing Sixtus (very favourably) with Constantine the Great.

7 North Wall The Last Supper Cosimo Rosselli

The Ceiling (begun 1508) Commissioned by Julius della Rovere

The ceiling completes the Three Ages of St Augustine by dealing with the Creation to the Law. The complex iconographic scheme was probably devised by Julius' theologians and given to Michelangelo to interpret as he would. He arranged it in three superimposed zones intended to carry the eye upwards.

1 The lunettes and triangular spaces above the windows depict man on earth and include images of the ancestors of Christ as they are listed at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. The spandrels at the four corners of the Chapel show four Old Testament examples of salvation. David and Goliath, Judith and Holofernes, the Death of Haman and the Brazen Serpent.

2 The second zone contains images of those endowed with special understanding of the divine; the Old Testament prophets whose work it was understood spoke of the coming of Christ and the Sibyls of the ancient world who were also believed to have prophesied Christ. In the same zone are the nudes (ignudi). They may represent the Atlantes, the supporters of Heaven or they may be earthly examples of Ideal Beauty

according to Plato's doctrine. There are actually three kinds of nude; - the pairs which surround the prophets, the pairs of putti on the pilasters and the young men who surmount each pilaster, these three categories correspond to the three elements that constitute man according to the Neo Platonists - intellect, (by the prophets) body (supporting the pilasters) and soul (the most beautiful and the closest to God).

3 The highest zone which contains the main narrative scenes is concerned with Before the Law. These are intended to be read from the east end of the chapel and begin with the Creation followed by the Fall and the Expulsion and concluding with the Sacrifice of Noah, the Flood and the Drunkenness of Noah. Effectively the Creation scenes are closest to the altar representing the Grace of God and those concerning the disgrace of man are the furthest away from that Grace.

The Last Judgment. Begun for Clement, completed under Paul.

This work was begun almost 30 years after the ceiling and after the Sack of Rome at a time when the Church was under attack from Protestant reformers. The fresco replaces the first scenes from the lives of Moses and Christ above the altar. Christ is surrounded by the Saints, the blessed rise on His right while the damned fall towards the bottom of the wall where Charon the ferryman takes them to the underworld where Minos waits. The mouth of Hell opens immediately above the altar reminding us that Christ alone stands between us and damnation. When the fresco was unveiled in 1541 it attracted criticism because of the nudity of some of the holy figures; the draperies were added later by Daniel Volterra.

The tapestries designed by Raphael - the cartoons for which are in the V&A were intended for the lower register of the walls. The St Peter episodes went under Moses because Peter taught the Jews and the Paul episodes under Christ because Paul taught the Gentiles. The tapestries were actually installed but were looted during the siege of Rome and burned to extract the precious metals woven into them. The cartoons came to England in the 17th century and several tapestries were woven from them including the set at Hampton Court.