

# Michelangelo and Me

Robin Richmond, April 4, 2021

Easter Day



*The Creation of the Sun and Moon, Michelangelo Buonarroti*



*Self-portrait from The Last Judgment*



*Restoration project with scaffolding*

I have missed churches, museums and galleries so much during this past year that I am now inventing them in my sleep. Frequently. Hilariously. Inadequately. Tragically. In 1985, I began writing my first book, *Michelangelo and the Creation of the Sistine Chapel* (1992). It was about Michelangelo and the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. My book was the first to use the

newly-cleaned images and I spent eight years going back and forth to my beloved Rome - where I grew up - as the controversial restoration progressed. I became a familiar presence on the scaffolding that used Michelangelo's own *ponteggio* holes, and I overcame my serious vertigo to examine the frescoes from an arm's length away, over 40 feet above the marble floor.

The first time I went to the chapel the lift to the scaffolding was broken. Undaunted, I climbed a rickety ladder past the Botticellis, Signorellis, Peruginos, Rossellis, and Ghirlandaios on the side walls until, ashen-faced, faint and nauseous, I reached the ceiling. I wrote a blasphemous postcard to my home in London, "Today I touched the face of God." More importantly to me I nestled my hand inside a handprint of Michelangelo's. When the ceiling project was completed, I climbed the ladder propped up against the Last Judgment on the altar wall, and touched Michelangelo's agonised self-portrait, as the flayed skin of Saint Bartholomew.

*Autres temps, autres mœurs...*

Those Roman years were the most exciting period of my life as an art historian. And in some ways as an artist too. As a gift to me, when my years of research were over, the lovely team of restorers under Maestro Colalucci wanted to give me a present. What did I want? They gave me 20 minutes entirely on my own in the Chapel. Lying on the cold marble floor I communed *tutta sola* with *Il Divino* - and life has never been quite the same since.

Last night in my sleep I painted my own version of the Sistine Chapel. How mad is that? But this is how desperate I am for a real experience of art. Virtual tours of exhibitions and museums don't work for me. I am one of those terrible people who almost sets the alarms off, and who gives museum guards conniption fits because I need to get so close to the art. If I could stroke the paintings I would. I need to smell the varnish and see the brush marks. I do know that I need to resist my transgressive urges. But now I am struggling with fantasies of breaking into the National Gallery because it's been too long, this past year. Seeing family up close and personal is the best present one can imagine. But the museums opening again will be pretty amazing. I won't have to invent my own mediocre version of Michelangelo. I will see him again.

Happy Easter.