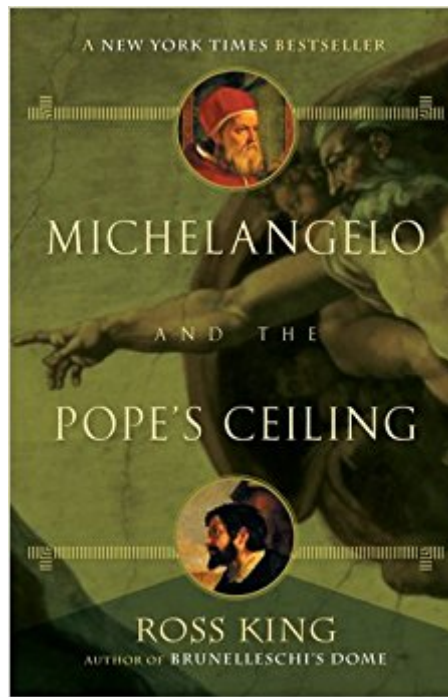


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Michelangelo And The Pope's Ceiling



Synopsis

In 1508, despite strong advice to the contrary, the powerful Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the newly restored Sistine Chapel. With little experience as a painter (though famed for his sculpture David), Michelangelo was reluctant to begin the massive project. Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling recounts the four extraordinary years Michelangelo spent laboring over the vast ceiling while the power politics and personal rivalries that abounded in Rome swirled around him. Battling against ill health, financial difficulties, domestic problems, the pope's impatience, and a bitter rivalry with the brilliant young painter Raphael, Michelangelo created scenes so beautiful that they are considered one of the greatest masterpieces of all time. A panorama of illustrious figures converged around the creation of this great work-from the great Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus to the young Martin Luther-and Ross King skillfully weaves them through his compelling historical narrative, offering uncommon insight into the intersection of art and history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'd seen this book and BRUNELLESCHI'S DOME in bookstores for quite a while. I just couldn't bring myself to purchase either for a very silly reason. The author's name, Ross King, just didn't sound very authoritative to me, for some reason. More a name for a movie actor than a Renaissance biographer. As it turns out, that was a baseless bias. King definitely knows his stuff, as the book's bulging bibliography will attest to. Purists may be put off by the fact that this book is so entertaining, that it can't possibly be serious scholarship. I say let them stick to Jacob Burckhardt, I'll take Ross

King, any day. This is a masterly book, and King is an excellent story teller, marshalling his facts and arraying them in taut, controlled prose. His is an excellent overview of the full panoply of figures and events that made late 15th, early 14th c. Italy such an extraordinary place and era.

Michelangelo lived in a time that teemed with larger than life figures. The Borgias were still wielding influence in Florence and Rome. Amongst Michelangelo's contemporaries that put in an appearance in the book are the firebrand priest, Girolamo Savonarola, Martin Luther, Machiavelli, and two of the other greatest artists of the Renaissance, Leonardo and Raphael. The rivalry between Michelangelo and Raphael is one of the keynotes of the book. Raphael and his team of artisans were frescoing the pope's private rooms in the Vatican at the same time Michelangelo was frescoing the massive vault of the Sistine Chapel. Raphael is depicted as an expansive, open-minded, hedonist, good looking and attractive to all. Michelangelo is a "jug-eared, flat-nosed, and rather squat, somewhat miserly loner, who also happened to possess an unparalleled artistic genius.

Ahhh.....remember Charlton Heston as Michelangelo- all alone, on his back- painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Well, in this very informative and enjoyable book, Ross King quickly clears up those two major misconceptions. Michelangelo was not on his back: the scaffolding was placed 7 feet below the ceiling. Michelangelo painted while standing, reaching overhead, with his back arched. And, he had plenty of help in his glorious enterprise. Michelangelo took on the project with a great deal of reluctance. What he had really been excited to do was the job Pope Julius II had originally had in mind: the sculpting of the Pope's burial tomb. For Michelangelo considered himself to be a sculptor rather than a painter. Though originally trained, in his early teens, as a painter, he had devoted himself almost entirely to sculpting in the nearly 20 year period which had elapsed between his training and receiving the summons from Pope Julius II to begin work on the Sistine Chapel. Additionally, Michelangelo had never before painted a fresco, which is a very tricky process involving painting on wet plaster. (He had once started preparatory work on a fresco project where he was supposed to go "head to head" with Leonardo. Alas, that project never came to pass!) So, Michelangelo did what any sensible person would do...he hired as assistants artists who had prior experience doing frescoes. Thus begins the fascinating tale of the four year project. Along the way we learn of Renaissance rivalries- Michelangelo had once taunted Leonardo da Vinci in public for having failed in his attempt to cast a giant bronze equestrian statue in Milan.

Have you ever visited a landmark and had a tour guide who brought history to life - an engaging and

entertaining person who had all the facts at his (or her) fingertips, but who delved beneath the facts to bring the participants to life? If so, you will understand the appeal of Ross King's "Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling," for Mr. King is that kind of a tour guide. He takes us into the Sistine Chapel and fully explicates Michelangelo's masterpiece as a work of art, including everything from the technique of fresco to the kinds and colors of paint (and their origins) to the various challenges in the technique known as foreshortening. Although he liberally sprinkles the text with Italian and art terms, he explains each as he goes along. Along the way, he also drops in interesting bits of information, such as, which panels in the painting, Michelangelo first saw from the floor of the chapel and what stylistic and color changes he incorporated in the panels after that, or which poses must have been difficult for the models (and who some of the models may have been) or why the medallions are disproportionately small to the rest of the work. Mixed in with art history and art appreciation are relevant pieces of contemporary history: the debauched and demanding Pope Julius II and the state of the papacy during his reign, the wars and diseases that afflicted the various participants and hindered work on the chapel, and numerous other small details that enliven the narrative. King compares and contrasts Michelangelo with great rival, Raphael, who was painting the pope's private apartments at the same time Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

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