

LIES AND MISDEMEANORS
Gianluigi Colalucci's Sistine Chapel Revisted
by Richard Serrin

The ceiling was dirty; there was no doubt about that. Since the mid-1970's mass tourism drove over 10,000 people a day through the chapel to gaze spellbound at the frescoes of Michelangelo, while the pollution of Rome rose to the ceiling. In 1985, when my wife and I were on the scaffolding, the paintings were virtually unreadable. The question is not whether the frescoes needed to be cleaned, but whether they were responsibly cleaned, whether Prof. Colalucci and Dr. Mancinelli were honest in their report to the public on how they restored the frescoes, and whether they were honest in their putative appraisal of Michelangelo's technique which governed their methodology.

I propose that the visual and textual evidence allows us to pronounce negatively on all these points, that the campaign to clean the ceiling and the wall was fraught with lies from the moment the Eleazar-Matthan lunette was cleaned. At that moment they knew they had exposed something shockingly new, and they knew it was not Michelangelo's intention. The proof of this exists footsteps away in the Pauline chapel where Michelangelo's frescoes from 1542 to 1549 remain in a good state of preservation. Yet they continued the Glorious Restoration with the same solvent (AB57) in the same manner. This was inexcusable.

Why had they persisted? We cannot know until Prof. Colalucci chooses to tell us. We can only conjecture that it had to do with Nippon Television's investment (six million dollars) and with the art historical novelty produced by the cleaning which would create renewed interest in a work that for all practical purposes had become an old warhorse for art historians. Then, too, in this age of advertisements and color television, it might have been thought that the brightness of the chapel would better meet the expectations of our consumer society. Such cynicism cannot be ruled out.

Be that as it may, from the decision to use AB57 as the principal cleaning agent, the die was cast for a further inevitable decision. It was declared—although Prof. Colalucci already knew this was not true – that Michelangelo used buon fresco throughout the chapel with minimal secco additions. This pronouncement was made because AB57 in its application (applied twice for three minutes penetration

each time) could leave nothing left on the plaster but buon fresco, and even then with an attenuation of color, so strong is the solvent.¹

The alarming new appearance of the frescoes necessitated the promulgation of further fictions. Prof. Colalucci asserts that Michelangelo's palette contained a "deceptive joyfulness of color... that shrunk from emotiveness and passion"; that Michelangelo was "well aware of the eternal rules that governed painting and that he interpreted them correctly... in constructing his figures by juxtaposing colors from which black was excluded"; in effect, that Michelangelo had painted his sombre themes in the bright colors of billboard advertisements. "It is clear," Prof. Colalucci continues, "how distorting that dark and irregular veil of discoloration had been. [It] revealed only monumentality and that false, dark melancholy that had a facile hold on the human soul." Surely this latter is the more appropriate mode to express the profound Christian truth of man's relation to the God of the Pentateuch, and the colors of Renoir and Monet better suited for the truths of the European middle-class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There is still more nonsense in Prof. Colalucci's statement. The exclusion of black from the palette was initiated by the Impressionists when they began to paint outdoors and was a striking innovation. To be sure, there is no "black" in nature; but form in real life is created by the diminution of intensity and brightness of color as it darkens into shadow – and such determined Michelangelo's form. Early photographs of the ceiling demonstrate this, and they are not obscured by the "timid and summary cleanings," as Prof. Colalucci attests; nor, given the condition of the ceiling throughout its history, would restorers have needed to reinforce Michelangelo's own labors by adding "black shadows," even assuming they would have had the temerity to try.

Ample evidence has been adduced over the years to discredit Prof. Colalucci's thesis of Michelangelo's color to the unbiased mind, but this unfortunately does not seem the case. We may cite three testimonies, if only for their intrinsic interest. Giorgio Vasari, a friend of the artist, writes: "In seeking to show the emotions and passions of the soul, and in seeking this end alone, he has neglected charming color." Yet it is precisely "charming color" that Prof. Colalucci has given to the frescoes,

¹ AB57 was developed for the cleaning of marble statues to remove the atmospheric grime that had accumulated on and penetrated into the pores of the surface. It is entirely unsuited for the delicate decisions needed to clean frescoes.

which he then attributes to Michelangelo. Vasari tells us further, that when Raphael, “who had great powers of imitation,” saw the ceiling, he immediately changed his style which was to be seen first in his frescoes in the Chigi chapel in Santa Maria della Pace and in the *Isaiah* in Sant’Agostino. Our expectation is to find them similar in color to the new Sistine, but our hopes are dashed; they are much closer to the uncleaned figure than the cleaned ones.

Joshua Reynolds first visited the chapel in September, 1749, frequenting it and the Stanze of Raphael for several months. I quote from Joseph Faringdon’s *Memoirs* of the painter: “Reynolds, according to his own declaration, was not then sufficiently cultivated to appreciate, on a first view, the excellence of the sublime conception and grand execution displayed in the works of Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican... The line of art he had hitherto pursued was of an inferior kind. His mind had been absorbed in the study of real life, of color and effect, and consequently his mind had not been raised above that level. Grandeur of composition... had never been the subject of his contemplation. In the Vatican Reynolds saw the art of majestic simplicity, unadorned by the splendour of color.” His subsequent thoughts expressed in lectures to the Royal Academy eloquently attest that it was Michelangelo who overwhelmed him and affected the sober coloring of so much of his own production. What Reynolds would have thought of Professor Colalucci’s chapel must be left to the imagination.

My third witness is J. W. Goethe whom I quote from his *Italian Journey*. Goethe’s first visit to the chapel was on November 22, 1786 when the sun was in the position to “best light the frescoes.” “Looking at these marvellous works of Michelangelo our admiration was divided between the *Last Judgement* and various paintings on the ceiling.” On November 28 he paid his second visit when “...we got them to open the gallery for us, because from there the ceiling can be seen from closer range... I am so enthusiastic about Michelangelo that I have lost all my taste for Nature.” By December 3 Goethe has become so obsessed with the chapel that he can “see almost nothing else.”

On February 2, 1787 he writes of a visit during the ceremony of the Blessing of the Candles. He was very much upset and soon left with his friends. “I thought to myself: these are the very candles that for three centuries have blackened the frescoes, and this is the very incense which, with sacred insolence, not only wraps the sun of art in clouds, but also makes it grow dimmer every year and in the end will

totally eclipse it.” What are we to make of this? Never has this thought occurred to Goethe in his many earlier visits and on more than a dozen later ones throughout 1787-88 during which he enjoyed several “perfect experiences.” There is no further hint of imperilled frescoes; Reynolds only thirty-eight years before expressed none of these misgivings. Goethe’s state of mind may have been conditioned by the fact that February is the gloomiest month of the Italian winter. One thing, however, of importance emerges from the report of this visit: the chapel was rather of a darker tonality than of brilliant pastel hues.

Another passage in Goethe confirms this. In August 1787 “...the [German] artists had just discovered Michelangelo. In addition to all the other qualities they admired, they said he surpassed all others in his sense of color and it became the fashion to dispute whether he or Raphael was the greater genius. The latter’s *Transfiguration* was often severely criticized and the *Disputa* considered his best work. All this pointed toward the coming predilection for an earlier school of painting, a taste which a dispassionate observer could only regard as a symptom of mediocre and unoriginal talents.” For those who have the 1509-1510 *Disputa* in mind, a work begun under the influence of Perugino, and know the violent chiaroscuro of the *Transfiguration*, it is clear that the color of Michelangelo is more sombre and the modelling more sculptural than in the *Disputa* and what is to be seen today where the argument would be meaningless. We might also recall Charles De Tolnay’s sensitive observations on Michelangelo’s color in 1945 monograph on the ceiling and the wall which refute definitively Prof. Colalucci’s assertion that the color had disappeared under centuries of dirt and the glue of earlier restorations.

If we now turn to the visual record, it will show conclusively that Michelangelo’s secco modelling disappeared during Prof. Colalucci’s intervention. In the first fresco cleaned –Eleazar-Matthan - there is a patch of buon fresco restoration which includes half of the purse of Matthan’s wife. There is no record of this repair, but it seems unlikely to be later than the eighteenth century. One can be certain that the patch matched the tone of the fresco in its then present state, and its discrepancy with the Colalucci fresco is evident. Nor is this a unique instance: in the *Punishment of Haman* a similar repair and discrepancy can be noted. It is in continuing his radical cleaning after discovering his error in the first fresco cleaned

that we must indict Professor Colalucci of criminal negligence in his responsibilities. (Gross negligence does not seem quite strong enough.)

There are as well numerous examples of the removal of a secco layer that is obviously integral to the subject and for some unaccountable reason unretouched by Professor Colalucci's team. Here we list four: the lack of modelling on the purse of the Cumaean sibyl; the reinless donkey in the *Deluge*; the missing iris and pupil in the eyes of the woman in the *Jesse* spandrel²; the loss of marbling on the column in the spandrel of the *Angels Carrying the Instruments of the Passion*.

On the other hand, close comparison with photographs from 1938 and 1972 show instances of repainting what has been lost in cleaning. They rarely if ever correspond to the loss they replace. The most egregious example is the prophet Zechariah, who has been stripped of all of Michelangelo's pentimenti in secco and then wholly repainted by Prof. Colalucci, thus altering the figure substantially from Michelangelo's final intention. Such repainting is universally present throughout the chapel. Here are six: the drapery of perhaps all the prophets and sibyls; the eye of Jonah's whale and the shadow emanating from Jonah's foot (this latter done long after the restoration was finished); the brilliance behind the *Judging Christ*; all of *God Separating Light and Darkness*; the entire sky and all the clouds in the *Last Judgement*.³ All give the lie to Prof. Colalucci's statements that he avoided the "addition of artificial glazes and new material which would deteriorate relatively rapidly." And this is Professor Colalucci's own assessment of the implications of his actions. We can only stand in awe before such bare-faced dissimulation. Our guess is that an air brush and acrylic or modern casein paint played a large part in the intervention. Michelangelo's brushwork and color, the autograph of genius, still evident in the Pauline Chapel (if yet unrestored), is almost entirely gone.

The Glorious Restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes has destroyed them forever. What we say now cannot bring them back to life. We can only speak out to document the accountability of the Vatican restorers so that it does not pass unrecognized. Other restorations of our day are equally irresponsible, only of lesser magnitude (with the possible exception of the *Last Supper* of Leonardo). Much of the

² The woman's stare, incidentally, had captivated Dr. Mancinelli, the director of the project.

³ This was repainted after assuring us that the cleaning of the sky required special attention because of the delicate nature of lapis lazuli.

genius of the masters of the past has simply been erased. Not only is the world the poorer, but the young painters who might wish to learn from their example are deprived of the subtle enchantment of their ancient skills. The loss is immense. At present our culture apparently has no use for the artistic heritage of the past, and such restorations are ensuring that we can make no use of it in the future.