

## *The Art Newspaper* (May 2007)

### Michelangelo's Composition

Two of Michelangelo's initial studies for *The Last Judgment* were discussed in an advertisement in the May 2007 issue of *The Art Newspaper*. Both show that, even before he began work on the wall, Michelangelo was trying to compose the mass of figures into a head. The evidence is explained below and again, in greater detail, in Part One of *Michelangelo's Art Through Michelangelo's Eyes*.

## The First Compositional Sketch

The argument that the mass of figures in the *Last Judgment* forms the distinctive profile of the revered Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri, is supported by voluminous evidence. This month we demonstrate that two of Michelangelo's compositional studies for the mural are also shaped into "heads." In the first sketch, at left below, "a bearded head", suspiciously similar to Michelangelo's own, replaces Dante's. Portraying himself makes sense within the inner tradition of Christianity and the mystical thought that Michelangelo was familiar with. "Know thyself" is the motto of all mystics. If we can understand our own mind, the idea goes, we can reach God or as close to divinity as possible. It is also the allegorical underpinning of Dante's *Commedia*. It is not easily achieved, though, which is why Michelangelo, as is clear from his letters, was always striving for spiritual perfection. It is also the reason why Michelangelo himself said, as other artists have too, that "Every painter paints himself."



Michelangelo's Compositional study



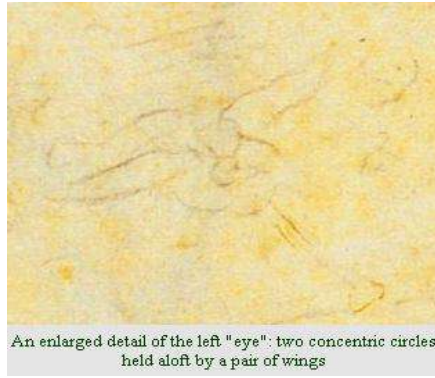
Portrait of Michelangelo



Diagram of how the figures form a head with eyes, mouth, moustache and beard

The sketch, at left above, is compared in the diagram at right to a portrait of Michelangelo done during his lifetime. Since Michelangelo never painted a conventional self-portrait, he may have known that this image, though not by him, would be remembered as his likeness. You can see in the image at right the overall shape of a head, along with facial details that confirm it. There are circular marks for both eyes, including an eyebrow. A horizontal torso is used to indicate his moustache while more figures below create the shape of his rectangular beard.

The eyeballs and pupils are clearly marked, one eye seemingly with wings symbolic of imagination. The detail is enlarged below.



An enlarged detail of the left "eye": two concentric circles held aloft by a pair of wings

It is also worth noting that Christ, the largest figure, is positioned in the center of "the brain", at top, and directly between the "eyes". He therefore seems to emerge from the poet's head as Athena did from Zeus'.

## The Second Compositional Sketch

For enlargement, click here: <http://www.artscholar.org/gallery/3/CompSk2.jpg>

In a second compositional sketch for the *Last Judgment* (at left) the mass of figures is once again shaped into a "head" though it faces left not right (see detail in diagram 1 below). It still has a rectangular beard, though. As in the first sketch Christ, the largest figure (shaded blue in diagram), is placed in the center of the "brain case" directly above the eyes and looks down between them.





1

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The "eye" on the left is formed by the circular top of a man's bald head (symbolizing his brain) while the eye on the right, perhaps "closed", is formed from the muscular shoulder and arm of another man. The arm symbolizes the manual craft of an artist. With these "hidden" eyes Michelangelo has concisely explained that the vision of a great artist combines intellect and craft in a creative struggle, seen in the wrestling figures, all of which represent various aspects of Michelangelo's own self. To him, as to many others in the Renaissance, the creative act in an artist's mind was a metaphor or echo of divine creation.



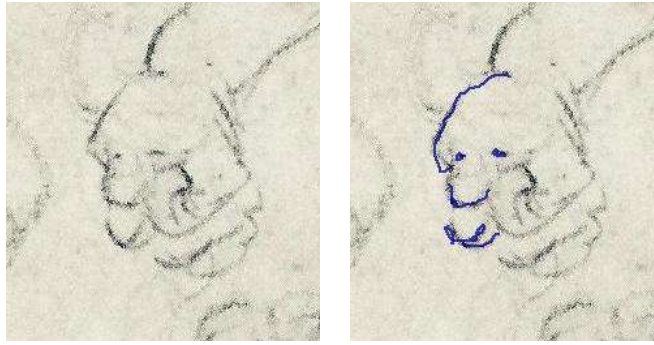
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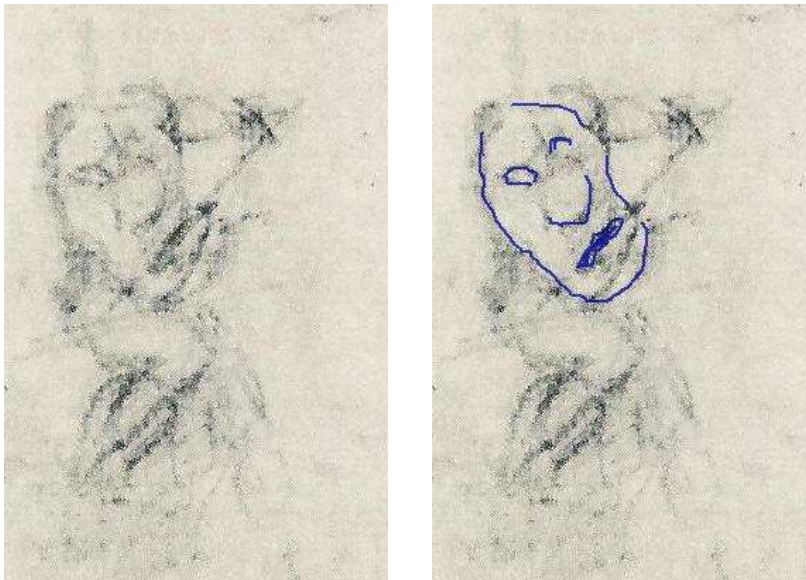
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A man, whose head is level with and between the "eyes", raises an arm to strike a figure below (2). His pose is that of a sculptor about to strike his marble and is not coincidental since he is inside Michelangelo's mind. The figure to the right of Christ (3) has a similar association. He is Saint Sebastian and was retained in the finished mural holding his arrows (4). The arrows resemble the paint brushes Michelangelo used to paint the mural. Moreover, since Saint Sebastian was later pierced by these paintbrush-arrows, the use of the saint here cleverly symbolizes that the artist "paints" himself.

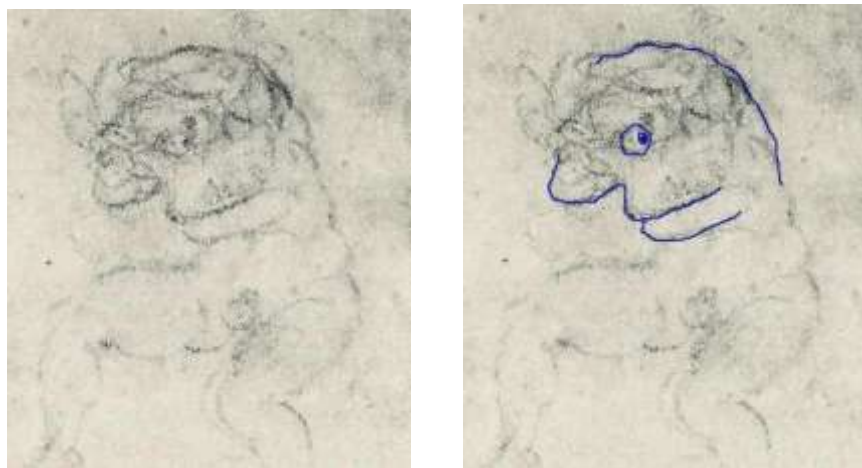
Across the rest of the same sheet on which this "head" appears are studies of individual figures or limbs, several of which are also attempts to turn them into simple cartoon-like faces. They are such a constant feature of Michelangelo's art (see the essay) that they appear here almost like mindless doodles. Three of them are illustrated below with accompanying diagrams to indicate the "facial" features.



The clenched hand on an extended arm, above, describes a face with an upturned smile and two dots for eyes. Indeed the lines that make up the face are difficult to identify as parts of a clenched fist. What are the two dots for, for instance? He must have added them, as scholars know he did in an architectural drawing of a cornice, to "make a face."



At left a masculine torso becomes a "face" again with circular marks for eyes and a darkened line across the abdomen for a mouth. Again, what are those circular marks for, if not to describe "eyes"?



Lastly, a torso with bent arm (above) becomes a "face" in profile with part of the man's lowered head indicating an "eye". His arm becomes the "nose".