

Article

“But Angels Don’t Have Wings”: Art, Religion, and Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* in Gilio’s *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters*

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Abstract: This article provides a close reading of Giovanni Andrea Gilio’s critique of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* as presented in the *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters* (1564). The dialogue has generally been taken as reflecting the emerging Counter-Reformation concerns regarding the indecorousness of contemporary religious art, concerns that led to the censoring of the *Last Judgment*’s nudes in 1564 after the Council of Trent’s decree on sacred images. One frequent justification for ecclesiastical oversight over the production of religious art was that artists such as Michelangelo had prioritized their art over its religious contents and devotional aims. Though Gilio’s work has been read as confirming this view, this essay argues that the various opinions expressed during the animated exchanges in the dialogue yield a set of nuanced and often innovative interpretations of the *Last Judgment* that resist a reductive dichotomy between art and religion. Whether intentionally or not, the dialogue conveys that by the time of Michelangelo, and perhaps because of Michelangelo, the forms of art and the contents of religion could not be so easily distinguished from each other, largely because the artist’s subjectivity blurred the boundaries between the two.

Keywords: Michelangelo Buonarroti; the *Last Judgment*; Giovanni Andrea Gilio; *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters*; Pietro Aretino; visual arts and religion; early modern art criticism and theory; counter-reformation; censorship



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1. Introduction

Despite the praise that was lavished on Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* on its unveiling in 1541, it also immediately became an object of controversy (Figures 1 and 2).¹ In a letter of that same year to his patron Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga of Mantua, Nino Sernini anticipated that the work would provoke debate: “the work is of such beauty that your excellency can imagine that there is no lack of those who condemn it. The very reverend Theatines are the first to say that the nudes do not belong in such a piece”.² Sernini associates the work’s beauty with its spectacular nudes, nudes that depicted the resurrection of the dead, when souls would be reunited with their now-glorified bodies as in Christ’s own resurrection. Though other aspects of this work were subsequently criticized, without its nery tangle of resurrected flesh, it is difficult to imagine that it would have attracted the same attention. Nudity was indeed the first target of criticisms of the *Last Judgment*. Vasari reported that one of the earliest came from the master of ceremonies of the Sistine Chapel, Biagio da Cesena, who, immediately after the fresco’s unveiling, reportedly claimed that the number and indecency of the nudes made it more appropriate for a bathhouse or tavern (Vasari 1962, vol. 1., p. 75). If on the one hand the work was celebrated by some as a spectacular climax of Michelangelo’s achievements in the Sistine Chapel, a powerful affirmation of the truths preserved by the Roman Catholic Church, for others the *Last Judgment* made a pitiful spectacle of itself, undermining those truths at their very source.



Figure 1. Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*. Sistine Chapel, Vatican. Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_\(Michelangelo\)#/media/File:Last_Judgement_\(Michelangelo\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_(Michelangelo)#/media/File:Last_Judgement_(Michelangelo).jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).



Figure 2. Marcello Venusti's copy of the uncensored version of the *Last Judgment* (1549). Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marcello_Venusti_Juicio_Universal_Tempera_Grassa_sobre_tabla_1549_Museo_di_Capodimonte.jpg#/media/File:Marcello_Venusti_Juicio_Universal_Tempera_Grassa_sobre_tabla_1549_Museo_di_Capodimonte.jpg (accessed on 31 October 2023).

Among the fiercest of the early critics was Pietro Aretino, who exclaimed in his 1545 letter to Michelangelo that, “as a baptized man, I am ashamed of the license. . . that you have taken in expressing the ideas towards which every aspect of our absolutely true faith aspires. For how can that Michelangelo of such stupendous fame, that Michelangelo of outstanding prudence, that Michelangelo of admirable habits, have wanted to show to the people no less religious impiety than artistic perfection?” Saints are displayed “without any of the decency proper to this world,” and angels are “deprived of celestial ornament”. Even the pagans, after all, had covered the private parts of their gods and goddesses. “And yet he who is a Christian. . . by valuing art more than faith, makes such a genuine spectacle out of both the lack of decorum in the martyrs and virgins, and the gesture of the man grabbed by his genitals, that even in a brothel the eyes would shut so as not to see it. . . It would be less of a sin for you not to believe than by believing in this manner to weaken the faith of others”.³ Aretino insists that it is Michelangelo’s self-regard as a great artist that led him to break the rules of decency, whereas the inventions and beauties of religious art must serve rather than supersede its purpose, which is the spiritual improvement of the faithful. When art calls more attention to itself or its own making than to its subject, as Michelangelo’s figures do, then the art and its maker are to be censured and censored. Artistic individualism undermines religious content.

Aretino’s accusations were picked up by subsequent critics due to the concerns with orthodoxy that became an increasing priority in the face of the Protestant menace, especially under the reactionary papacy of Paul IV (1555–1559). The Trent decree on sacred images, released in December 1563, was the immediate catalyst leading to Daniele da Volterra’s commission in 1564 to paint strategically placed drapery over the genitals of the nudes in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*.⁴ The decree served, for the most part, to reaffirm the importance of sacred images in the spiritual life of the faithful against the claims of Protestant iconoclasm, but it also included a stern warning about the nature of such images, recommending that “all lasciviousness [be] avoided; so that images shall not be painted or adorned with a seductive charm” (Schroeder 1941, p. 216).⁵ In this increasingly repressive context, the *Last Judgment* became the work that repeatedly catalyzed discussions over the proper role of art in the depiction of religious subjects, and those discussions tended to follow Aretino’s early lead in establishing an opposition between the priorities of art and those of religion.⁶ Among these discussions, Giovanni Andrea Gilio’s dialogue *On the Errors and Abuses of Painters*, written in the early 1560s and published in 1564, is of particular interest (Gilio 2018).⁷ Modern scholars have been quick to read it as a conservative work that, despite its humanistic framing, points the way toward more rigidly prescriptive Counter-Reformation works such as Gabriele Paleotti’s *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (1586) (Paleotti 1961).⁸ No doubt there are good reasons for this interpretation of the work, starting with its very title. In what follows, however, I will suggest that in its engagement with Michelangelo’s works, and in particular the *Last Judgment*, Gilio’s dialogue articulates a more complex and open-ended set of perspectives on the relationship between art and religion than he has been given credit for. This may be due to the fact that the work was written a few years before Trent’s decree on sacred images was published and before the Church began to assert its authority more intentionally over the making of such images.⁹ Despite his explicit biases around the questions raised in this dialogue, Gilio may have been in a position to be more dispassionate in his analysis of the questions provoked by the *Last Judgment* than would be the case later. Though Michael Bury states that the Socratic form of this dialogue allows for contrasting points of view in order to gradually contradict and reject these in favor of a dominant conservative viewpoint (Gilio 2018, p. 50), I will suggest that those competing voices are not successfully repressed by the end of this work.¹⁰ More specifically, the dialogue leaves us with some intriguingly open-ended perspectives on the relationship between historical truth and fiction in religious art that have important consequences for how the meanings and intentions in such art might be understood. Cumulatively, the debates in this dialogue over Michelangelo’s artistic choices in the *Last Judgment* and in his works from the Pauline Chapel yield some potentially

innovative ways of reconciling the supposed tension between art and religion.¹¹ By the conclusion of this work, Gilio leaves us with a perspective on religious art that places it at the intersection of various inextricable factors that include the work's scriptural sources, its "historical" contents and their literal and/or allegorical dimensions, its didactic function, its artistic form, and the artist's subjective intentions. At such a knotty intersection, we discover, interpretive ambiguities inevitably arise that cannot be resolved fully. Whether intentionally or not, the dialogue conveys that by the time of Michelangelo, and perhaps because of Michelangelo, the forms of art and the contents of religion could not be so easily distinguished from each other, largely because the artist's subjectivity blurred the boundaries between the two.

2. The Religion of Art: Michelangelo's *Capricci*

No ambiguity is initially apparent in Gilio's dedicatory letter to Alessandro Farnese, in which he declares that "It seems to me that today, when modern painters have to produce a work, their first thought is to twist the heads, arms, or legs of their figures so that they could be said to be strained [*sforzate*], and sometimes these movements [*sforzi*] are such that it would have been better to have done without them; while they pay little or no attention to the subject of their intended paintings" (Gilio 2018, p. 87). Echoing Aretino, Gilio claims that too much attention to art undermines the communication of its content. Though this letter acknowledges that artists of his time, such as Michelangelo and Raphael, had restored painting's "true character as an art," it also regrets the fact that painting has concurrently "strayed from the truth of the subjects represented" (Gilio 2018, p. 85). The clear message is that the ultimate aims of contemporary art are in tension with those of the subject matter itself of sacred works. The subsequent dialogue, however, gradually undermines the opposition between art and religion so confidently announced here. In the first place, the context and the participants of the dialogue itself seem to promise a genuine intellectual exchange. The interlocutors form a group of well-educated and refined individuals, including three lawyers, a doctor, a canon, and a merchant specifically identified as *letterato* [literary]. Though they do not claim any specific expertise in the art of painting, they are clearly aware of developments in the history of art, and they deploy their extensive knowledge of ancient rhetoric and literature, as well as of scripture and theology, to develop theoretical definitions of art and to discuss specific works. As the ecclesiastic in the group, Ruggiero Coradini is tasked with critiquing Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, but different interlocutors authoritatively take the lead on various other topics of discussion.

Having gathered in the kind of bucolic springtime garden that is always conducive to cultured exchange among humanists, the group's initial concern is to define the various possible genres of art. They begin by establishing the distinction between three types: the true [*il vero*], the fictional [*il finto*], and the fabulous [*il favoloso*] (Gilio 2018, p. 100). The true is that which actually exists or has existed in the past; the fictive is that which appears to be true, though it is not (the verisimilar); and the fabulous is that which is obviously false, such as Aeneas' ships turning into swans. In relation to these kinds of subjects, the interlocutors define three kinds of painters. The "pure historian" [*puro storico*] only depicts what is true, the "pure poet" [*puro poeta*] creates a range of combinations of the fictive and the fabulous, while in the third category are painters that mix the historical with the poetic (Gilio 2018, pp. 100–1). After a relatively brief discussion of the poetic painter, more than half of the dialogue is given over to its central concern, historical painting, and, more specifically, paintings of sacred images and events. The most succinct definition of the historical painter is provided by Silvio Gilio: "For it is the case that the historical painter is nothing other than a translator who translates history from one language into another; that is, from the language of the pen into that of the brush, from writing into painting" (Gilio 2018, p. 132) Consequently, "the [historical] artist who accommodates his art to the truth of the subject is cleverer than the one who distorts the plain subject for the sake of the alluring beauties of the art of painting" (Gilio 2018, p. 132). The interlocutors seem to agree with

these basic claims, but when their discussion centers around a specific *istoria* in front of them, their certainties waver.

It is Silvio himself, for example, who complicates matters when he responds to Puldoro Saraceni's criticism of the strained, "exaggerated" poses of the angels holding up the instruments of Christ's passion in the *Last Judgment*, because they call attention to the artist's own skill rather than to the religious significance of the scene (Figure 3). Silvio objects, however, suggesting that "that was done to show the dignity and power of the art, and beyond that, out of reverence for those sacred instruments; for although certainly a single angel could carry them effortlessly. . . this would not have given them the appropriate majesty. So I think he represented that crowd of angels to make the instruments more revered, solemn, and devout" (Gilio 2018, p. 147). Given that Gilio's dedicatory letter to Farnese begins by objecting to the artifice of strained and contorted bodies in contemporary art, it is interesting that here we encounter a spirited defense of the same. One must assume, given Silvio's previous claim, that in this case Michelangelo's angels do in fact "accommodate art to the truth of the subject matter," since the figures are described as exemplifying the power of art to intensify devout meditation on Christ's passion.

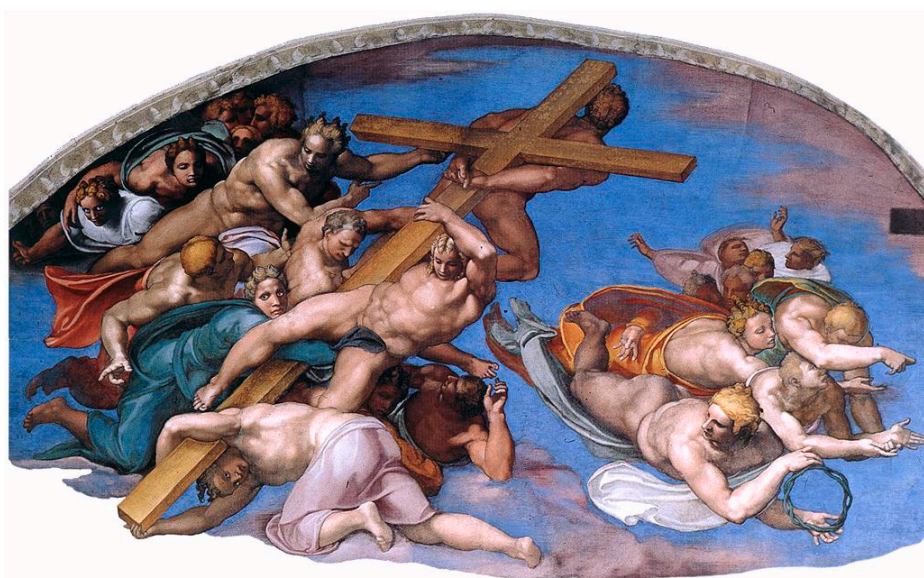


Figure 3. Detail from the *Last Judgment*: Angels with the instruments of Christ's passion. Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_\(Michelangelo\)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_Giudizio_Universale_11.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_(Michelangelo)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_Giudizio_Universale_11.jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).

After a series of brief forays into works by Michelangelo, the group chooses to focus exclusively on *The Last Judgment*. The reason for this choice is clear: Michelangelo is the greatest artist of his time, and in this work, Silvio states, "he has shown what the art [of painting] is capable of" (Gilio 2018, p. 156). Now, the group retrieves an actual print of the fresco in order to comment on it, and when it is unfolded before them, Francesco Santi cannot help but lavish it with praise:

Here my lords is the composition of the brilliant Michelangelo; the place where I think all modern painters learn what and how great the art of painting is. For in it he has achieved such excellence that he deserves to have statues erected to him in every country and even in every city, in order that those who come after him may hold him in the same veneration as we hold Apelles, Zeuxis, and the other famous painters. . . For truly he deserves eternal praise for having restored art to its decorum [*decoro*]. (Gilio 2018, p. 157)

There is no question here of the fresco's achievement as a work of art, and we can assume that what astounds Francesco is Michelangelo's depiction of the human figure,

for which he was most famous. Because the subject is “an ecclesiastical and theological one,” it is the ecclesiastic, Ruggiero, who is tasked with explaining whether this *istoria* has “followed the opinions of the holy doctors and observed the truth of the history” (Gilio 2018, p. 157). The strict Ruggiero immediately goes to work, remarking that,

If we consider its purity as history, I think we will find there more personal inventions (*capricci*) than truth. For Michelangelo has preferred to satisfy the art [of painting] in order to demonstrate what and how great he is, rather than the truth of the subject matter. And I think the reason for this is that finding himself with such a large space and so many figures with which to show every possible movement and pose that the human body can gracefully adopt, he did not want to lose the opportunity of leaving to posterity a record of his extraordinary mind. And it is a wonderful thing that no single figure in this portrayal does the same as another. In order to achieve this he set aside devotion, reverence, historical truth, and the honor due to such a very important and great mystery, which no one should think about, let alone see, without experiencing the greatest terror. (Gilio 2018, pp. 157–58)

Ruggiero does not take issue with the *Last Judgment's* achievements as a work of art, but, as Aretino had argued, it is only that: a performance of skill and artistry that overwhelms, conceals, and demeans its subject matter. The real subject of the work is Michelangelo himself, since its many and variously posed figures are there to be revered as manifestations of his genius.

In his *Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari had famously perceived a real rather than narcissistically flaunted coincidence between God’s creative activity and Michelangelo’s when he had described the *Last Judgment* as the peak of his achievements precisely because of its exclusive attention to the naked figure. Speaking of the latter work, he claimed that “the intention of this most exceptional man was to paint nothing else but the most perfect and most proportioned composition of the human body in its most varied poses” (Vasari 1962, vol. 1, p. 74).¹² It was a work that, “in our art, is the example and great picture sent by God so that human beings will be able to see the workings of fate when supreme intellects descend to earth and are infused with the grace and divinity of knowledge” (Vasari 1962, vol. 1, p. 80).¹³ Michelangelo’s perfect bodies, inspired by God, are a prophetic vision of those that will rise on the Last Day. The resurrection of the flesh affirmed in the Nicene Creed (*carnis resurrectionem*) had provided Michelangelo with a subject matter that was perfectly suited to his celebrated abilities in depicting the human body. The truths of religion and the truths of art were seamlessly intertwined here so long as “belief in the efficacy of carnality to express spiritual truths held sway in the visual arts” (Talvacchia 2013, p. 49; Hall and Cooper 2013).¹⁴ Similarly, in a letter to Michelangelo about this work, Anton Francesco Doni had praised it as collapsing the distinction between real event and representation:

To my ears has come the fame of the *Last Judgment* which for its beauty, I believe, on that day when Christ will come in Glory, will require that He command everyone to take those poses [in your fresco] and show that beauty, and also that hell [should] contain those shadows that you have painted in a way that cannot be bettered. (Doni 1552, p. 8)¹⁵

Both witty and earnest, Doni’s conceit built on the familiar notion that, in their art, painters and sculptors imitated God, the first artist. In the case of the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo’s divine talents had created such a perfect work that Christ himself will have to imitate it on the actual Day of Judgment. The fulfillment of art and of sacred history will coincide on that day, since Michelangelo’s painted bodies will correspond exactly with those real glorified ones. Art will coincide with reality, or reality will coincide with art.

Gilio was aware of these kinds of celebrations of Michelangelo’s works, and following the lead of Aretino, they required him to respond by identifying an opposition between the aims of art and those of religion. Against the notion that those beautiful naked bodies

were “historically” appropriate, Ruggiero condemns them as arrogantly foregrounding the artist’s own genius. It may be for this reason that, in the passage quoted above, he does not single out the nakedness of Michelangelo’s figures for criticism but rather disapproves of their poses. Whereas Vasari celebrates Michelangelo’s inspired *ingegno* throughout the *Lives*, the word Ruggiero most frequently employs to introduce his critiques of the artist is *capriccio*. A *capriccio*, in Francesco Alunno’s *Ricchezze della lingua volgare* (1543), “is an irrational and sudden appetite. . . Capricci are those shudders or spasms of cold which come at the beginning of a fever, from which comes the verb to feel horror or disgust (*raccapricciare*)”.¹⁶ Later in the seventeenth century, Filippo Baldinucci’s *Vocabolario Toscano dell’arte del disegno* (1681) would define *capriccio* in the context of art as “one’s own thought or invention. Thus, made according to ‘capriccio’ or fantasy. . . And ‘capriccio’ is also used at times for the thing itself that is made, such that this, whether a painting, a sculpture, or what you will, is my ‘capriccio’”.¹⁷ A *capriccio* is thus an irrational whim or desire, a subjective, idiosyncratic fantasy or invention, but also something that gives you chills, something potentially scary. *Capricci* may be very useful in poetic or mixed paintings, which allow for artistic license, but for Ruggiero, they are off limits in historical paintings.¹⁸

When Ruggiero lists his various objections to the *Last Judgment*, he often introduces these as a *capricci* in the negative sense of the word, insofar as they are instances of subjective self-expression. These include (1) Michelangelo’s *capriccio* in painting the angels holding up the symbols of humankind’s redemption (the cross, the crown of thorns, etc.) in such strained poses that they seem to be exerting unnatural efforts; (2) his *capriccio* in paying “more attention to his brush than to the truth” (Gilio 2018, p. 166) by depicting the rising dead in different states of resurrection, some still partly skeletal, some clothed or partially clothed, and some fully naked; (3) his *capriccio* in depicting the resurrected figures as not looking wide awake or aware yet of “where divine justice orders them to go” (Gilio 2018, p. 172); (4) his *capriccio* in showing some of them flying toward Christ at different moments in time, “as if to do this were in our power” (Gilio 2018, p. 173); (5) his *capriccio* in depicting the angels lifting some of the risen up to heaven with effort, some even by means of religious implements such as the rosary (Gilio 2018, p. 174); (6) his *capriccio* in mixing the blessed with the damned in the air, so that it is difficult to distinguish between them (Gilio 2018, p. 176); (7) his *capriccio* in representing Christ with no beard and standing rather than sitting in judgment (Gilio 2018, p. 177); (8) his *capriccio* in including the old, children, and the bald among his figures rather than youthfully mature bodies (Gilio 2018, p. 188)¹⁹; (9) his *capriccio* in painting the virgin Mary turning away in fear, as if terrified by her Son’s judgment (Gilio 2018, p. 192). Though he does not introduce the following specifically as *capricci*, he also criticizes the fact that the damned embrace each other; he objects to the presence of Charon ferrying the damned into hell, since he is a figure from ancient mythology; and he declares that Michelangelo’s angels should have wings and his saints halos (Gilio 2018, p. 194). As *capricci*, these are all personal, subjective intrusions on the part of the artist into a history that should be objectively “translated” for the benefit of the faithful. Anything that strays from the literal translation of scriptural word to image likely reflects self-referential capriciousness. By contaminating his *Last Judgment* with his *capricci*, Michelangelo’s fresco becomes a “mixed” painting in which the true and the fictive are entangled, to the detriment of the former.

3. Historical “Truth” and the Hazards of Literalism

In the course of this discussion, however, the dialogue betrays some serious problems with the very possibility of literally “translating” sacred text into sacred image and raises some interesting questions about the role of the fictional, or of poetic license, in the creation of religious art. These questions still linger at the conclusion of the dialogue. What emerges in the disagreements between Ruggiero and his interlocutors is that it is not so easy to identify what the “literal” truth might be of the “history” of the Resurrection of the Dead and the Last Judgment, nor whether that literal truth can or even should always be depicted. An example of the latter problem arises even before the discussion of the *Last Judgment*,

when Troilo raises the question of painting God’s image, since God is immaterial, and since doing so would seem to contradict the prohibition of the creation of such images in Exodus 20:4. Pulidoro replies that this was an injunction given to the Jews, who were more prone to idolatry, and that Christian painters are permitted to depict God as an old man in order to convey to the ignorant his infinite knowledge and wisdom (126). In terms of the theoretical categories established at the beginning of the dialogue, in other words, at the very heart of Christian art we find a sanctioned fictional representation. Troilo accepts this but then goes on to argue, referring to Michelangelo’s Creation scenes in the Sistine Ceiling, that since creation is the work of all three persons of the Trinity, then three persons should have been depicted in the act of creation, not just one. At this point, Vincenzo Peterlino intervenes, arguing that if God were to be depicted as three, it should be as three distinct figures, not one torso with three heads, an image he had seen in a nearby convent, and which he deemed “monstrous” (Gilio 2018, p. 128). It is unclear how much Gilio is in control of the ironies that emerge here, but to what degree are we still in the realm of “pure history,” when a “truly” immaterial God has been “translated” into an old man, into a body with three heads, and then into three distinct bodies? If the painter of sacred histories should imitate the theologians and not the poets, as Ruggiero later states (Gilio 2018, p. 196), we seem to be at an impasse, since the symbolic or metaphoric are inescapable.

Ruggiero is aware of this problem, of course, since he knows well that allegorical or metaphorical readings are central to biblical exegesis. Vincenzo, for example, responds to Ruggiero’s complaint that Christ is shown standing rather than seated on a throne in judgment (Figure 4) as per the gospel of Matthew (19:28, 25:31), by appealing to allegorical readings of the text:



Figure 4. Detail from the *Last Judgment*: Christ in judgment with the Virgin Mary to his right, surrounded by saints. Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_\(Michelangelo\)#/media/File:Michelangelo_-_Cristo_Juiz.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_(Michelangelo)#/media/File:Michelangelo_-_Cristo_Juiz.jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).

The throne and the sitting down do not mean in this case a material throne of the kind we use, nor a real act of sitting down. Rather, the former means the souls of the just, it being written: “the soul of the just is the throne of Wisdom”, and by the sitting down is meant the authority to judge, the truth of which is witnessed by the Psalm where we read: “Thou sittest upon the cherubims”, and in another place: “Said the Lord to my Lord: Sit thou at my right hand”. If we try to take these words literally it would produce an absurdity, for God would become a material being, which he is not. The other reason is the terrifying awfulness of the sentence on the damned, which would not have been delivered sitting down. (Gilio 2018, p. 179)

Vincenzo’s interpretation underscores again the extent to which scriptures themselves often cannot be read literally, while also implicitly reminding us that Christian artists

had for a long time given fictional human form to a God who is immaterial. A certain flexibility in interpreting *both* the language of scripture and its representations in art is inevitable when engaging with both. Though Ruggiero acknowledges that scriptural texts sometimes must be read “in a mystical or allegorical way”, he insists that first every effort must be made to preserve their “literal meaning” (Gilio 2018, p. 176). It remains unclear, however, how these distinctions are to be made, given the very difference of opinions we have witnessed over the standing Jesus. Ruggiero himself seems uncertain about this at times, as in an exchange over the fearful bearing of the Virgin Mary next to Christ. Literally, he argues, she should not show any terror, since judgment has been rendered and she would know that it is just and irrevocable. Vincenzo objects that Michelangelo’s reason for depicting her this way is to recall her traditional role as merciful intercessor, and even if intercession is no longer possible on the Last Judgment, as Ruggiero points out, it is important for the viewer to experience her empathy and compassion. Ruggiero finally allows this “fiction”, as he calls it, for the sake of the ignorant viewer who will draw some comfort from this image (Gilio 2018, p. 192).

Vincenzo’s third point in this rejoinder explicitly defends Michelangelo’s own expressive interpretation of the judgment scene, since he suggests that the emotional intensity of this moment would have been communicated more powerfully by having Christ stand as he pronounced his dreadful sentence. The physical or literal difference between standing and sitting is now reinstated as an artistic choice, an important psychological, as opposed to theological, element in communicating dramatically to the viewer. A similar point had been made earlier in the dialogue, after Francesco had criticized Michelangelo’s depiction of Christ in the *Conversion of St. Paul* in the Vatican’s Pauline Chapel (Figure 5): “[Christ], without any dignity [*gravitas*] or decorum [*decoro*] at all, appears to fall from the heavens in an action that lacks reverence”. Silvio objects to this interpretation, praising Christ’s pose “for showing the power of [divine] grace, which at times can be violent”, and for demonstrating the “agility of [Christ’s] glorious body” (Gilio 2018, p. 143).

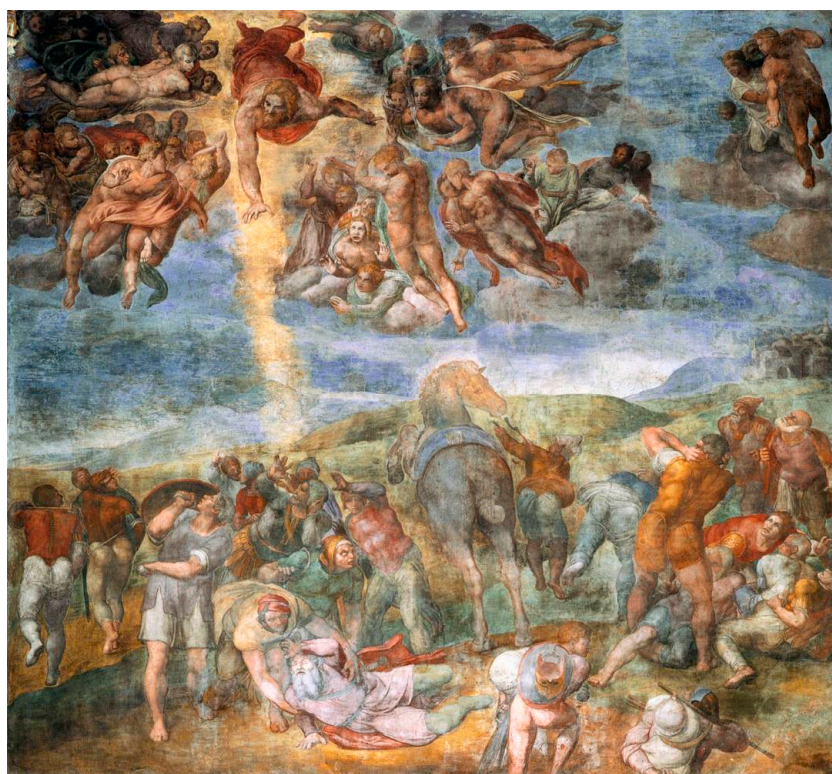


Figure 5. Michelangelo, *The Conversion of Saul (Paul)*. Pauline Chapel, Vatican. Public Domain: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversione_di_Saulo_\(Michelangelo\)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_paolina,_conversione_di_saulo_01.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversione_di_Saulo_(Michelangelo)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_paolina,_conversione_di_saulo_01.jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).

Silvio, who earlier had suggested that “the artist who accommodates his art to the truth of the subject matter is cleverer than the one who distorts the plain subject for the sake of the alluring beauties of the art of painting”, here rejects Francesco’s claim that the pose serves the interests of art at the expense of devotion. Though Francesco insists on his opinion, Silvio has at the very least pointed out that this figure can be read as expressing a religious meaning through the very originality of Michelangelo’s artistic invention. In these latter examples, it should be clear that it is not so much the allegorical or figurative dimension of the scriptural source that is adduced to justify Michelangelo’s artistic choices, but his expressive intentions. The difference between these two is not explicitly acknowledged, but repeatedly expressiveness becomes its own justification.

Contradictions and inconsistencies like these frequently undermine Ruggiero’s attempts to identify Michelangelo’s “errors”, since he is often unable to convincingly refute his interlocutor’s objections. One of Ruggiero’s first criticisms, as mentioned above, regards the varied expressions and states of embodiment of the rising dead (Figure 6):



Figure 6. Detail from the *Last Judgment*: Resurrection of the Dead. Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_\(Michelangelo\)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_giudizio_universale,_dettagli_35.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_(Michelangelo)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_giudizio_universale,_dettagli_35.jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).

Some are already clothed with flesh, some only in part, some just beginning to be covered, some naked, others dressed in pieces of cloth or the shrouds with which they were buried; one, as if embarrassed, tries to free himself from them, one gives signs of not really being awake, one shows doubt as to where divine justice wants him to go; one emerges from a cave, another just sits, a further one kneels; some do one thing, some another. This is all wrong. . . (Gilio 2018, p. 166)

Despite his aims, ironically, Ruggiero in fact captures with real poetic intensity the human dimension of the scene he is concerned with, and Silvio’s response seems precisely to celebrate this dimension:

But it seems to me that this is one of the most appealing and beautiful mysteries to be found in the whole of this history, because it shows clearly that each person must come forth at the time of the Resurrection, wherever they are buried. . .

Furthermore, how many people have been buried in sacks, sheets, veils, and other cloths according to the customs of different places? And this was, I think, done deliberately [by Michelangelo], in order to show the variety of the dead and the different customs between peoples. . . . And because the artist altered things a little, he should not be judged unfaithful. . . . As for the man who lifts himself up and surveys the heavens, I don't think this is intended to mean anything other than that having been resurrected he doesn't know whether he deserves pity or justice; he behaves thus because he is in doubt. (Gilio 2018, p. 166)

For Silvio, the variety of poses, clothing, and states of embodiment of Michelangelo's figures vividly conveys this resurrection as experienced at different moments, in different ways, and by different individuals. He defends Michelangelo's artistic choice as having religious significance since it engages the spectator more immediately in the experience of this moment. Silvio also supports Michelangelo's depiction of the event by claiming (as had Condivi) that it followed the description provided in Ezekiel 37:1–10. Ruggiero, however, insists that "the events will not happen as you think, nor as Michelangelo has shown them" (Gilio 2018, p. 166). He points out that all will be resurrected naked, just as Christ was, since the clothes he was buried with remained behind in the tomb after he rose (Gilio 2018, pp. 166–67). Ruggiero also refutes Ezekiel as writing metaphorically rather than literally and adduces Paul as his authority for how events will actually unfold:

Paul tells us that it will be in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, in a moment indivisible and imperceptible, so there will be no time at all for the dead to come out of underground places, kneel down, crouch, prop themselves up, rub their eyes as if they had been asleep, arrange their features, call others to awake, and suchlike vanities. It will happen so fast that the putting on of flesh will not be observable. (Gilio 2018, p. 167)

What becomes clear during this exchange is that, for Ruggiero, the central events of the Resurrection and Last Judgment are essentially un-representable in time: "Four things will happen in an instant: the resurrection of the dead, the separation of the good and evil, the snatching up of the saved, and the transformation of the bodies" (Gilio 2018, p. 173). The physical and emotional transformations and movements that define Michelangelo's dynamic vision of these events are, thus, its fundamental problem. Painting this scene "as history demanded it" (Gilio 2018, p. 173), one might surmise, would yield by contrast a static and schematic composition in line with traditional medieval representations, with the saved in the air to Christ's right, the damned below to the left of Christ, all of them naked glorified bodies wearing the same ecstatic expressions if saved and depraved expressions if damned. The event, in other words, can only be represented *after* the fact. What also emerges in these exchanges is that Ruggiero's interpretation of this future "historical" event is by no means reliably authoritative given the many different scriptural sources on which it is based. In Marcia Hall's words, "Because none of the scriptural texts on the Last Judgment is definitive, and they are in fact difficult to reconcile, even the Church Fathers disagreed on some key points" (Hall 2005, p. 20). And indeed the conversation often digresses into questions and debates about what actually will happen on the Last Day.

Ruggiero's interlocutors consistently express impatience with his literalism. When, for example, he points out that only bodies, not clothes, will be resurrected, Troilo Mattioli exclaims, "Well, I think you are splitting hairs. Painting too needs its own decorum [*decoro*] and freedom in many things" (Gilio 2018, p. 172). Poetic license (or *capriccio*) must have its place. When Ruggiero points out that those rising should not seem uncertain about their fates (Figure 7), since as souls they already knew where they had been assigned immediately after death, Francesco defends Michelangelo's choice by suggesting, "It could be that this was only done to warn us, to show us the different fates of men, since strange things happen at times in the course of life. It may have been done so that everyone may more readily think about these things" (Gilio 2018, p. 173). Francesco proposes that Michelangelo took this license so that the scene would resonate with a viewer's own present

uncertainty about the state of their own soul. He reads that uncertainty as entailing a kind of existential suspension within the ongoing process of the “strange things” with which life presents us. Michelangelo’s decision to create a fiction whereby the rising dead are not yet certain of their judgment, therefore, invests this moment with greater and more immediate religious significance than if the scene had been literally rendered, since it opens viewers to their own “movement” through life. Similarly, when Ruggiero describes as “ridiculous” Michelangelo’s decision to show angels fighting with devils and devils wrestling with sinners, since physical force would have no place on the day of judgment, Vincenzo argues that, “I think it was done to show how evil spirits are always tempting us and battling with us, and how we are defended by angels” (Gilio 2018, p. 175). Vincenzo’s point is that in this case, too, Michelangelo’s “fiction” serves to present salvation history as a very real process the viewer is immediately and constantly involved in. Here, too, scenes that have been criticized as self-referential performances of artistry are defended as essential to the spectator’s participation in their religious meaning.



Figure 7. Detail from the *Last Judgment*: The Elect. Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_\(Michelangelo\)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_giudizio_universale,_dettagli_33.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Judgment_(Michelangelo)#/media/File:Michelangelo,_giudizio_universale,_dettagli_33.jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).

In the course of this sustained analysis of the *Last Judgment*, Ruggiero also critiques the varied movements and expressions of the saints surrounding Christ (Figure 4), some of whom “look up and some down, some this way and some that, and some at their companion and some elsewhere, so that they seem rather to be at a market or fair than at the day of judgment” (Gilio 2018, p. 180). Ruggiero himself, however, must admit that this criticism might be dismissed on aesthetic grounds because “it would be neither beautiful nor attractive [*vago*] if everyone, as though stupefied and mad, were to behave identically in staring at him” (Gilio 2018, p. 181). Silvio is quick to agree, claiming that “apart from the fact that it would be very stupid if everyone gazed in the same way, it would also show a certain ignorance in the artist if all the people in such a crowd were to perform the same action [*gesto*]” (Gilio 2018, p. 181). As in the previous instances, Silvio’s objection to Ruggiero implicitly resists a simplistic antithesis of art and subject matter, between the *finto* (fictional) and the *vero* (true). Whatever the theological truth value of attributing a variety of poses and expressions to the blessed, this variety will engage the viewer more effectively in the experience itself of blessedness. The distinct individuality of the Elect makes them more like the spectator, and, therefore, involves us in their beatitude. The aesthetic interest

that variety provokes is linked to the spiritual intensity with which a viewer will respond to the scene. Ruggiero, however, insists on his literalizing recommendations, though this leads to one of the more problematic moments in the dialogue.

Though the disapproval of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* had principally centered around its hundreds of nudes, with respect to this issue Ruggiero finds himself caught in a bind provoked by his own literalism. Troilo first raises the problem by asking why Michelangelo had shown some of the figures in the fresco clothed, since, as Ruggiero had previously stated, the resurrected should all be naked. Ruggiero's response seems initially consistent with his earlier assertions. Michelangelo, he claims disapprovingly, "is using the license you speak about, which covers up, redeems, exonerates, and glosses over all the defects of the painters. It is used to bestow legitimacy on their mixing of the false with the true, the sacred with the profane" (Gilio 2018, p. 183). Ruggiero goes on to retract this condemnation, however, adding that in this particular case, the license that Michelangelo had taken is praiseworthy, since "certain fictions have been invented for the purpose of maintaining decency. . . Their purpose is to hide the shameful parts of the holy figures in a graceful way; and this Michelangelo has done with Christ, the Virgin, and with many other figures" (Gilio 2018, p. 183). Ruggiero then proceeds to condemn Michelangelo's decision not to clothe the majority of his figures, a decision that in principle privileges the truth of their resurrected nakedness over the fiction of their clothing. Troilo points out this contradiction: "If they are all to be resurrected naked and you approve of paying attention to the accuracy of even the smallest detail, do you seriously blame this representation of what will actually happen?" (Gilio 2018, p. 183). Here, Gilio implicitly raises a potentially legitimate defense of Michelangelo's use of the nude that recalls Doni's praise of the work as powerfully collapsing the distinction between sacred art and sacred history in its depiction of glorified bodies. The perfection of art embodied by Michelangelo's figures had led to the possibility of rendering the future glorification of our bodies as an immanent present.

Ruggiero defends this inconsistency by claiming that because of our own fallenness, spectators cannot respond to these naked bodies innocently, as will the blessed. Where earlier Ruggiero had argued that clothes cannot be resurrected, now he argues that the fiction of clothes should serve to cover up the truth of nakedness in the service of modesty [*onestá*]. Ruggiero adds that the many nudes in the *Last Judgment* are simply evidence of Michelangelo privileging "the attractions [*vaghezza*] of the art of painting" (Gilio 2018, p. 186). He assumes, that is, what we cannot really know: that Michelangelo's intention in depicting nudes was not to depict the historical truth of the resurrection of glorified bodies but to foreground his artistic ability in depicting these bodies. How, then, are we to apply to this circumstance Silvio's antithesis between the painter who accommodates his art to the truth of the subject matter and the one who distorts that subject for the sake of his art? The opposition between these two options collapses here, since the truth of the subject matter coincides with the beauties of the art of painting. Considering the difficult interpretive challenges provoked by the tensions between the literal and metaphorical or allegorical readings of both the scriptures and of Michelangelo's art itself, and provoked also by the difficulty in determining whether Michelangelo's artistic choices are vainglorious performances or forceful expressions of spiritual meaning, it becomes difficult to sustain the argument that sacred history can ever be "pure".

4. Michelangelo as "Mixed" Painter

Indeed, from the moment that Ruggiero calls for the naked glorified bodies at the Resurrection to be covered up by the fiction of clothing, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* necessarily must become a "mixed" painting as defined at the beginning of the dialogue, and as discussed at some length in its last section. The mixed painter, M. Pulidoro explains, is "he who produces a pleasant mixture of the true and the fictional [*cose vere e finte*], and who sometimes adds fabulous things [*le favolose*] as well, in order to increase the allure [*vaghezza*] of the work" (Gilio 2018, p. 199). Moreover, "when one wishes to work in this genre, one must make sure that the different elements agree with one another, and

that, whether the result of imitation or personal invention [*capriccio*], they appear to have originated from one individual, at a single moment in time" (Gilio 2018, p. 199). The elements of the painting must be related in such a way that "any viewer will regard the fabulous and the fictional parts as true and real" (Gilio 2018, p. 199). The mixed painter, thus, seeks a "truth-effect" that may require his inventive, subjective *capricci* to produce a persuasive sense of the unified reality of the work. The extent to which the category of the mixed painting has now implicitly absorbed the category of "pure" sacred history becomes clear when the group discusses Michelangelo's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* in the Vatican's Pauline Chapel (Figure 8). Pulidoro, who is in charge of defining mixed paintings, objects to Michelangelo's inclusion in this sacred history of fictional elements such as horses ridden without bridles and, more importantly, the fact that Peter is shown being crucified without showing the nails or ropes used in his martyrdom. In this case, Vincenzo offers a spirited defense of the artist's choice that reminds us of previous objections to Ruggiero's arguments. There is no need to show these details, he argues, because anyone would assume that a crucifixion requires them. He goes on to suggest that,



Figure 8. Detail from Michelangelo, the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*. Pauline Chapel, Vatican. Attribution: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo,_crocifissione_di_san_pietro,_1546-50,_02_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo,_crocifissione_di_san_pietro,_1546-50,_02_(cropped).jpg) (accessed on 31 October 2023).

what Michelangelo has done in this case is for the sake of embellishing the story, both to introduce a new usage in a new way and to display an aspect of the type of mixed painting [*mistura*] that you spoke of, so that here one may experience that saint's suffering. If you look at him in the position that he is in, you will judge from his movement the anguish of a man turned upside down; you can tell it from his eyes and from the curving of his chest, which make it appear that in his distress, he is suffering the agonies of death. Michelangelo assumes that the novelty of it will give more delight to the spectator and allure [*vaghezza*] to the work than if he had represented the atrociousness of nails, ropes, and chains. (Gilio 2018, p. 207)

Vincenzo encourages a response to the emotional expressiveness of the figure itself, with its straining torso and glaring eyes. Michelangelo's "novelty" is paradoxically to "embellish" the story by stripping away its distracting "historical" details. In its focus on St. Peter's body itself, the work is both more beautiful *and* communicates more effectively to the spectator the spiritual or religious meanings of the work. Michelangelo's novel "fiction", elsewhere defined as a *capriccio*, in this case intensifies the viewer's experience of the saint's suffering. Artistic virtuosity and devotion, as had been suggested regarding the figure of Christ in the same chapel, serve each other's purposes. By claiming that, here, Michelangelo displayed "an aspect of the type of mixed painting", Vincenzo undermines the purity of the category of sacred history. Interestingly, Pulidoro somewhat concedes Vincenzo's point, but he goes on to insist that in sacred images, such fictions should not be permitted, especially since though a cultured viewer might understand what Michelangelo was doing, an uneducated person might not: "This showing one thing and meaning another should never happen" (Gilio 2018, p. 210), Pulidoro argues, because the illiterate are not capable of interpreting metaphorically. But this is not relevant to Vincenzo's point, since responding to the tense expressiveness of Peter's figure does not require any particular knowledge. Moreover, his argument is also weakened by the fact that we have already been told that certain literal truths can be suppressed in painting for the sake of the illiterate, such as God's very immateriality or the nakedness of resurrected bodies.

As the discussion of mixed paintings develops further, so do the difficulties increase in distinguishing clearly between the true, the fictional, and the fabulous. Having returned to a definition of the fictional as the verisimilar, a "mask of the true" such that "where the true cannot have a place, the fictional cannot be" (Gilio 2018, p. 215), Pulidoro then tries to distinguish the fictional from the fabulous, which represents the impossible or what cannot exist in reality. But even these two categories, it turns out, can be confusingly mixed in the creation of figures like the Furies, which stand for something true (fury) but do not actually exist. Francesco perhaps inadvertently betrays the theoretical and interpretive gridlock their conversation has generated when he claims,

The painters before Michelangelo understood little or nothing of such mixtures [*mixture*], I think; for the art of painting was almost lost to human knowledge. As a person of vigorous intellect [*ingegno vivo*], Michelangelo always worked to restore the art to exactly what it had been among the famous ancient painters and sculptors. So he found new ways that delighted people so much that they have been taken up and used as much in pure histories as in poetic and mixed compositions. (Gilio 2018, p. 216)

The comment seems to fly in the face of Ruggiero's and Pulidoro's recommendations, since Francesco presents Michelangelo as an artist who can be celebrated precisely for having understood and revived the art of mixture, and whose methods were adopted in all three categories of paintings previously defined, including "pure histories". His conclusion implicitly confirms that there can in fact be no such thing as a pure sacred history after Michelangelo.²⁰

The dialogue concludes with an equally inconsistent discussion that centers around the history and function of holy images. Pulidoro claims that holy images were first painted to confirm Christians in their faith and to eradicate pagan idolatry (Gilio 2018, p. 227). Initially, it was stories from the Old and New Testaments that were painted in churches, such as the early Christian ones still present in Old St. Peter's, "although", he adds, "those figures look like ugly people [*baronci*], or were made by Goths".²¹ Perhaps inadvertently, Pulidoro dismisses the "primitive" nature of these images when compared to modern ones. This negative assessment of early Christian and medieval art had been implicit throughout the dialogue in the celebrations of Michelangelo's achievements as an artist—acknowledged even by Ruggiero—but it had also been explicitly voiced by Silvio in response to Ruggiero's comment that artists before Michelangelo "paid more attention to truth and devotion than to ostentation" (Gilio 2018, p. 160): "The people of that time", Silvio had answered, "were coarser, and since they were neither intellectually alert nor inventive, they relied on the

past; they could only produce clumsy work" (Gilio 2018, p. 161). In the last pages of this dialogue, however, when Ruggiero is asked for some set of rules or guidelines for how exactly sacred images should be painted (Gilio 2018, p. 230), the latter is essentially at a loss, claiming that these rules must have existed in the past but have been forgotten. He appeals, however, to "ancient custom", which, according to him, entails

painting chaste and devout sacred images, using the symbols that the ancients gave them by privilege of their holiness, which to modern [painters] have seemed base, uncouth, plebeian, old-fashioned, and humble, lacking in both intellect and art [*ingegno ed arte*]. For this reason, [modern painters], giving the art of painting precedence over decency, abandoned the practice of painting clothed figures and painted them naked, as they still do. And abandoning the practice of making figures devout, they gave them strained [*sforzato*] poses. (Gilio 2018, p. 231)

In these last exchanges, Ruggiero's appeal to tradition is clearly in tension with Puldoro's and Silvio's negative evaluations of early Christian or medieval art, and this tension remains unresolved. While praising examples of traditional modes of representations, Ruggiero identifies one last *capriccio* by Michelangelo when he points out that the early fathers allowed artists "to paint the angels (notwithstanding they are spirits) in the form in which they made themselves visible to men. In this, too, Michelangelo has wanted to find a new way, and that is to paint them without wings" (Gilio 2018, p. 231). Ruggiero's parenthetical qualification reminds us again of the difficulty of hewing to the literal, since, as disembodied spirits, even angels create "fictional" representations of themselves in their interactions with human beings. Moreover, Vincenzo's abrupt and perhaps humorously ironic response, again, complicates the issue of representing sacred images: "But angels don't have wings" (Gilio 2018, p. 231). Ruggiero acknowledges that the ancient custom was to provide them with wings as symbols of the speed with which they executed God's commands, but this, of course, is another visual representation of a metaphor. Is there, then, a right way to represent angels, or are truth, fiction, and even the fabulous hopelessly mixed when it comes to the "pure" history of sacred events? Michelangelo's gloriously lithe, muscular, and wingless angels, it would seem, are no more and no less metaphorical than traditional ones.

5. Conclusions

Gilio's dialogue is of particular interest because it was written and published shortly before Trent's decree on sacred images, after which more systematic and rigid guidelines were formulated to regulate the artistic creation of religious subject matter. However conservative Gilio's own tendencies may have been, in this dialogue, he voices a range of often compelling responses to Michelangelo's works that yield a genuinely complex engagement with the relation between art and religion. In the end, despite Ruggiero's call for a return to the devotional simplicity of early Christian art, this is obviously not a viable option, and indeed throughout the dialogue, the achievements of Michelangelo's art are acknowledged and even celebrated. What this dialogue reveals, perhaps, is the genuine challenge that Michelangelo's works, and his *Last Judgment* in particular, posed to conventional expectations regarding the didactic and devotional functions of art. The issue was not, as Ruggiero claims here, whether the *Last Judgment* was legible to the uneducated. The issue was how to reconcile the work's display of its artist's skill with the work's equally powerful commitment to its religious subject matter. Gilio's dialogue responds to the unusually original and intensely personal dimension of this spectacular representation of a religious event in which art and devotion were in fact indissolubly fused.²² In this moment, however, it was also clearly difficult to interpret idiosyncratic artistic choices as something more than self-aggrandizing gestures at odds with the public function of religious art. The difference between experiencing religious truths through the private intensity of an artist's faith and experiencing them as "objective" representations arousing the spectator's devotion is subtle, but nonetheless significant. In Gilio's dialogue, we witness some tentative steps toward experiencing Michelangelo's art in the first way,

positioned as it was at the confusing intersection of the literal and the metaphorical, the historical and the fictional, the true and the poetic, the self-referential and the devotional, the beautiful and the expressive. Gilio's dialogue, if not Gilio himself, bequeaths to the reader the idea that painting is always intrinsically mixed once artist, art, and its content have all together become the real subject matter of any work. Insofar as the license or freedom of *capriccio* could not be excised from the process of artistic creation, as is implicitly acknowledged in this dialogue, it promised an exhilarating and often fraught trajectory for the history, interpretation, and judgments of art.

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Notes

- ¹ “No painting in the history of the Renaissance was critiqued so assiduously or broadly about its decorum, religious significance, visual expression, or genre” (Schlitt 2005, p. 113). Melinda Schlitt, Bernadine Barnes, and Emily Fenichel provide excellent discussions of critical responses to this work (Schlitt 2005; Barnes 1998; Fenichel 2023). Paola Barocchi includes a summary of critical commentaries on the *Last Judgment* in her edition of Vasari's life of Michelangelo (Vasari 1962, vol. 3). Important studies on the subject of the Last Judgment and of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* itself in relation to the cultural, political, and religious contexts of the time include (De Maio 1978; Redig de Campos 1964; Partridge 1997; Mayer 2005; Fenichel 2023).
- ² Quoted and translated by (Barnes 1998, p. 78). The “Theatines” mentioned by Sernini were the religious order founded by the ultra-conservative Cardinal Gian Pietro Carafa, later Pope Paul IV, in 1524.
- ³ Quoted and translated by (Barnes 1998, p. 81). On the concept of decorum, see (Gaston 2013).
- ⁴ In the process, he also altered the potentially ambiguous poses of St. Blaise and St. Catherine of Alexandria, fully clothing the latter.
- ⁵ John O'Malley provides an important history of the writing of this decree (O'Malley 2013). For further reading on Reformation and Counter-reformation debates over images in this period see (Scavizzi 1992).
- ⁶ Alexander Nagel speaks of a “parting of the ways between art and religion” in this period, most evident in northern Europe, due to the iconoclastic bias of the Protestants, but also taking place in Italy (Nagel 2000, pp. 190–91).
- ⁷ All subsequent page citations of the English version of Gilio's text are from the excellent critical edition and translation by Michael Bury et al. (Gilio 2018). For the Italian original, I have consulted the text as edited by Paola Barocchi (Gilio 1961, vol. 2, pp. 1–115). The full title of the dialogue in Italian is *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie. Con molte annotazioni fatte sopra il Giudizio di Michelangelo et al.tre figure, tanto de la nova, quanto de la vecchia Capella del Papa. Con la dichiarazione come vogliono essere dipinte le Sacre Imagini*.
- ⁸ Charles Dempsey's approach to Gilio's dialogue exemplifies this kind of reading, though he utilizes the work in order to defend the orthodoxy of the *Last Judgment* (Dempsey 1982). One interesting qualification of this approach is Christian Hecht's interpretation of the dialogue as indirectly expressing sympathies toward the iconoclasm of the Reformers (Hecht 2012, pp. 432–44).
- ⁹ In this article, I will not address Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo sulla pittura, intitolato l'Aretino*, published in 1557. Though the dialogue repeats some of Aretino's criticisms of Michelangelo, it does so largely in the context of a discussion of the relative merits of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian as artists, and it does not reveal much interest in the nature of religious art as such. For the text, see (Dolce 1960, vol. 1, pp. 141–205). See (Lee 1940) on humanist theories of art.
- ¹⁰ In this sense, Gilio's work may be more appropriately viewed as a Ciceronian dialogue. Malcolm Schofield defines the latter as “more genuinely open-ended than Platonic” insofar as it leaves it up to the reader to adjudicate between “properly argued alternatives” (Schofield 2008, p. 63). In her study of the Renaissance dialogue, Virginia Cox argues that this is the kind of conversation enacted in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (Cox 1992, pp. 47–69). In his brief discussion of this dialogue, Vincenzo Caputo recognizes that the *Last Judgment* tends to resist definitive readings (Caputo 2010).
- ¹¹ A few scholars have noticed the forcefulness of some of the arguments made in Michelangelo's defense in Gilio's dialogue, though they do not provide a sustained discussion of these points of view (Barnes 1998, pp. 92, 97–98, 103–4; Barocchi 1961, vol. 2, pp. 530–32; Bury 2018, pp. 5–44). Barocchi and Bury both see Gilio as an essentially conservative critic in whom Renaissance humanist “temptations” (to use Barocchi's expression, p. 532) still persist despite his Counter-Reformation biases. I am arguing here that appeals to Michelangelo's expressiveness by some of the interlocutors in Gilio's dialogue point toward a new kind of

- interpretive approach to his art. Barnes' chapter on metaphorical painting in the *Last Judgment*, interestingly, seems to take its cue from Gilio's work (Barnes 1998).
- ¹² Translations of Vasari's text are my own. In his description of the creation of Adam on the Sistine Ceiling, Vasari had defined it as a work in which the first man "seems made anew by his supreme and first creator rather than by the brush and drawing [*disegno*] of such a man". In that instance, too, the subject was a glorified body (Vasari 1962, vol. 1, p. 44). Whereas in the *Last Judgment* Michelangelo has collapsed the distance between the present and the historical future, in the creation of Adam he has collapsed the distance between the present and the historical past. Though this passage about the *Last Judgment* was added to the 1568 edition of the *Lives*, it succinctly reflects Vasari's well-known opinions about Michelangelo as the undisputed master in representing the human body.
- ¹³ I am quoting here from the 1550 edition of the *Lives*, which Gilio had read.
- ¹⁴ That the subject of Michelangelo's fresco focuses as much on the resurrection of the body as on the Last Judgment must have seemed particularly serendipitous to Vasari, since he utilizes the language of resurrection throughout his *Lives* to describe the pictorial or sculptural creation of bodies that seem living. See, for example, his discussion of Michelangelo's *David* (Vasari 1962, vol. 1, p. 21). See also Stephen J. Campbell's provocative discussion of Vasari's use of this topos (Campbell 2002). For further reading on the immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body, see (Hall 1976; Di Napoli 1963).
- ¹⁵ The letter was dated January 12, 1543.
- ¹⁶ My translation: "CAPRICCIO si chiama un' appetito subito e senza ragione. . . CAPRICCII si chiamano quei ribrezi o griccioli del gielo, che vengono nel principio della febre anchora incerta. Onde viene questo verbo raccapricciare" (Alunno 1543, p. 28).
- ¹⁷ My translation: "Proprio pensiero e invenzione. Quindi fatto a capriccio o di fantasia. . . E dicesi anche capriccio talvolta alla cosa stessa fatta, cioè questo, o pittura, o scultura, o altro che sia, è un mio capriccio" (Baldinucci 1681, p. 28).
- ¹⁸ For an engaging discussion of this concept, see (Campione 2011).
- ¹⁹ In this dialogue, Ruggiero repeats the commonly held belief that resurrected bodies would all be 33 years old, the age of Christ when he was resurrected (171).
- ²⁰ In her commentary on the dialogue, Barocchi also notices the implicitly positive description of Michelangelo as a mixed painter in this passage (Barocchi 1961, p. 530).
- ²¹ The *Baronci* as the note to the English translation explains, "were a proverbially ugly family" (Gilio 2018, p. 227).
- ²² See (Forcellino 2011) and (Fenichel 2023) for eloquent accounts of the artist's personal religious investment in his later works.

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