

Sistine Chapel (Vatican City)

Private papal chapel, with a legendary ceiling fresco by Michelangelo



"It [is] no work for a papal chapel but rather for public baths and taverns."

Biagio da Cesena, Clement VII's Master of Ceremonies

- ❑ The simple exterior of the Sistine Chapel gives no hint of the extraordinary decorative richness within.
- ❑ Originally, Michelangelo was to paint only the Apostles, but eventually he painted more than 300 figures.

Built between 1473 and 1484 for Pope Sixtus IV, the Sistine Chapel lies within the Vatican City. Today it is the private papal chapel and the meeting place of the College of Cardinals when they meet in conclave to elect a new pope. But what draws visitors in droves are the frescoes of the High Renaissance genius Michelangelo Buonarroti.

The barrel-vaulted ceiling of the chapel represents the apex of Michelangelo's career with the nine paintings that make up *God's Creation of the World*, *God's Relationship with Mankind*, and *Mankind's Fall from God's Grace* (1508–12) covering 8,610 square feet (800 sq m). Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Julius II to paint the fresco. Completing the task almost singlehandedly, because the Florentine craftsmen assigned to help him did not meet his exacting standards, it was a feat of endurance for the artist, painting at a fast rate and working from scaffolding. The result is an unrivaled work of art that reinvented the depiction of the human form with the dynamic style of its more than three hundred figures. So arduous was this mammoth undertaking that Michelangelo forswore painting for twenty-three years until he returned to the chapel to paint *The Last Judgment* (1535–41) on the wall behind the altar—this time for Pope Clement VII, although it was completed under the patronage of his successor Pope Paul III. The painting proved controversial at the time for its inclusion of naked male bodies, depicted complete with genitalia.

Although somewhat dwarfed by Michelangelo's masterpieces, the walls of the chapel also contain significant works of art such as Sandro Botticelli's *The Temptation of Christ* (1482) and Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Christ Calling Peter and Andrew to their Apostleship* (1483). On special occasions the chapel is also decorated with tapestries created by Raphael. **CK**

