

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN



As we see in Michelangelo's fresco "The Last Judgement," begun 25 years after the completion of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the faithful will receive lasting rewards. Circa 1536–1541.

SACRED ART

Michelangelo's HIDDEN ROOM

Reveals His Pious Heart

JOHANNA SCHWAIGER

It must have been an exhilarating moment in 1975 when museum director Paolo Dal Poggetto discovered a trapdoor hidden under a cabinet in the New Sacristy of the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy. Under the trapdoor, stone steps led down to a tiny chamber that had gone unnoticed for 500 years. At first, it appeared to be just a storage room for coal, but Dal Poggetto suspected more beneath the plaster of the walls, given the room's location. Experts spent weeks removing the plas-

Why did Michelangelo, fearing for his life, hide from the very family that once took him under its wing?

ter with scalpels searching for clues to art remains, uncovering dozens of drawings, many of which were with almost certainty attributed to Michelangelo Buonarroti.

It was the art historical find of the century, and with this "unearthed" treasure, a story full of faith, power, and the tireless mission of an artist was brought to life.

It is now believed that this was the chamber where Michelangelo hid in 1530 for two months from the revenge of the Medici family in Florence, the most powerful bankers of the time.

"I hid in a tiny cell," Michelangelo wrote,

"entombed like the dead Medici above, though hiding from a live one. To forget my fears, I fill the walls with drawings."

The remains of these drawings raise the question of why Michelangelo, fearing for his life, hid from the very family that once took him under its wing.

At 14, Michelangelo was taken into the Medici palace by Lorenzo de Medici, who took notice of the young talent; he lived among them like a son. There, Michelangelo enjoyed the privilege of a humanistic education.

Continued on Page 4

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HISTORY

His Deeds and His

JEFF MINICK

Let me begin by making my prejudice perfectly clear. In the late summer of 1963, shortly before I entered Staunton Military Academy (SMA) as a 7th grader 200 miles from my home, my mother took me from Booneville, North Carolina, into Winston-Salem to watch the recently released movie "Lawrence of Arabia." My five younger siblings remained at home, and spending this time alone with Mom marks this event as a special moment from my childhood.

Director David Lean's film blew me away and remains one of the touchstones of my childhood. Scenes from that movie, which starred Peter O'Toole as Lawrence, somehow implanted themselves into my brain and being. When I reached SMA, I checked out Lawrence's "Revolt in the Desert" from the library and read it twice. I even wrote to Mom and asked her to send me a box of dates, such as Lawrence might have eaten. How she found this exotic fruit in rural North Carolina at that time I have no idea, but I received a package of dates in the mail.

Not only have I since seen that movie multiple times, but I've also read Lawrence's "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," "The Mint," and his anthology of short poems, "Minorities," the latter two published long after his death. I've devoured as well several biographies written about this man.

So be warned: I consider Lawrence one of the most remarkable figures of the 20th century. Here's why.

Preliminary Preparation

Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935) was, like his four brothers, illegitimate. His father, Sir Thomas Chapman, left his wife and family to live with Sarah Junner, a governess whom Chapman had gotten pregnant. Adopting the name Lawrence in an attempt to conceal this scandal, the family left Ireland for Oxford, England, where Lawrence later entered high school and eventually studied history at Jesus College. From 1910 to 1914, he worked as an archaeologist for the British Museum in the Middle East.

During adolescence and youth, Lawrence underwent self-imposed training and discipline which, unbeknownst to him, would later serve him well during World War I. He practiced a sort of asceticism, going long periods without food and toughening his body. He took extended bicycle trips, venturing into France and then into the Middle East. He studied military history—his thesis for Oxford University was on crusader castles in Syria. His archeology work at Carchemish (on the border between Syria and Turkey today) made him conversant in Arabic, and because he asked so many questions of the workmen on the site, he also gained a solid understanding of Arab culture and its tribal structures.

As a result, when World War I erupted, Lawrence had inadvertently created in himself a special set of skills that would prove invaluable to the British war effort and to the Arabs' desire to shake off the Turkish yoke.



T.E. Lawrence at Rabigh, north of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 1917.

The War Years

Once war had erupted in Europe in 1914, Lawrence joined the army, was commissioned a lieutenant, and was posted in December of that year to Cairo. There he worked for two years, chiefly as a map officer. In 1915, two of Lawrence's younger brothers died in the fighting in Europe. Feeling increasingly guilty for sitting out the war in an office, he jumped at the chance to travel to Arabia and appraise the newborn Arab revolt against the Turks, allies of the Germans. Eventually, Lawrence became a permanent adviser to Sherif Feisal, a leader of this uprising.

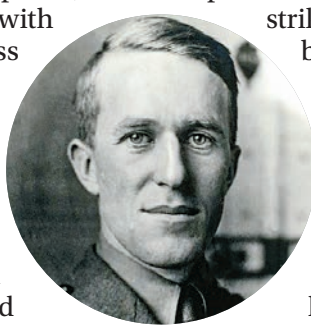
From this partnership came the military exploits that destroyed or pinned down thousands of Turkish troops and that gave Lawrence his fame from the postwar years right up to the present day. With no previous military experience in the field, he proved himself a master of tactics and guerrilla warfare, blowing up scores of bridges and railways, and striking hard and fast with small bands of men at Turkish encampments and outposts and then retreating again into the desert.

In one brilliant maneuver—he started with a handful of men and picked up others as he advanced—he marched on the port city of Akaba on the Red Sea, destroyed a Turkish command near that city, and captured Akaba. On Oct. 1, 1918, he and the Arabs under his command entered Damascus along with British Gen. Edmund Allenby.

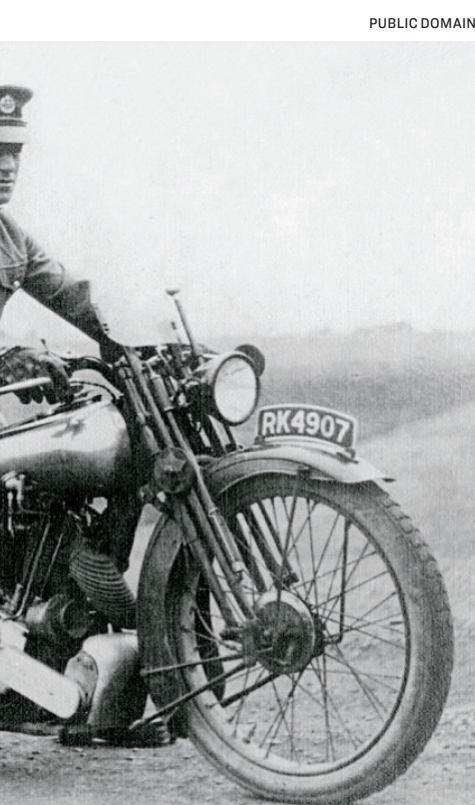
Fame and Anonymity

After the war's end, Lawrence fought to secure for the Arabs the freedom he had promised them during the revolt, promises he knew at the time might be impossible to keep. In the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916, Britain and France had divided up large parts of the Middle East, leaving no room for postwar Arab independence. After this diplomatic failure, Lawrence would go on to write "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," and then join the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Tank Corps using pseudonyms.

He chose to hide his identity, not very successfully, because of the tremendous fame and acclaim that descended on him after the war. American journalist and photographer Lowell Thomas had met Lawrence in Jerusalem in 1918, conducted interviews, taken many pic-



T.E. Lawrence in 1918.



T.E. Lawrence on his Brough Superior in 1925 or 1926.

Example: Revisiting T.E. Lawrence



Detail of "Colonel T.E. Lawrence," 1919, by Augustus John.

tures, and promoted his reputation first in America and then in Britain with his lantern slide shows and speeches. This was born "Lawrence of Arabia."

All his life, Lawrence had a love for speed and for machines that could deliver that speed. On May 19, 1935, soon after his retirement from the RAF, he died of head injuries incurred while riding one of his motorcycles, a Brough Superior SS100. Interestingly, his death helped inspire one of his attending physicians, Dr. Hugh Cairns, to research and develop helmets for motorcycle riders.

A 20th-Century Icon

Following his death, Lawrence remained a figure of fame and romance. As Scott Anderson of Smithsonian Magazine wrote: "Today, T.E. Lawrence remains one of the most iconic figures of the early 20th century. His life has been the subject of at least three movies—including one considered a masterpiece—over 70 biographies, several plays and innumerable articles, monographs and dissertations. His wartime memoir, 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom,' translated into more than a dozen lan-

guages, remains in print nearly a full century after its first publication."

Lawrence was an imperfect man. For the rest of his life, for example, he bore the physical and mental scars of the war, including a beating and possible rape by Turks who didn't recognize their captive. Doubtless other ghosts, like his illegitimacy and his dissatisfaction with the treatment of the Arabs following the war, plagued him as well.

Following his death, Lawrence remained a figure of fame and romance.

Yet as John E. Mack tells us in his book "A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence," Lawrence was also a man of many talents. For example, he writes that Lawrence "enabled others to make use of abilities they had always possessed but, until their acquaintance with him, had failed to realize." Mack later adds that "his fundamental importance for human history, and his lasting ability to influence the lives of others, derives as much from the example of what he was as from what he did."

Perhaps these same qualities inspired Winston Churchill to offer this eulogy for his friend Lawrence: "I deem him one of the greatest beings alive in our time. I do not see his like elsewhere. I fear whatever our need we shall never see his like again."

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust on Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning as I Go and "Movies Make the Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



Theatrical poster for "Lawrence of Arabia."

What Our Readers Say (#27, part 1)



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I love this paper. Besides current events, it has a great health section, recipes and more. **Getting the truth is the most important thing.**

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This is the only newspaper I know that reports accurately. It's a jungle out there, you have to be careful what you read.

MARIA TAYLOR

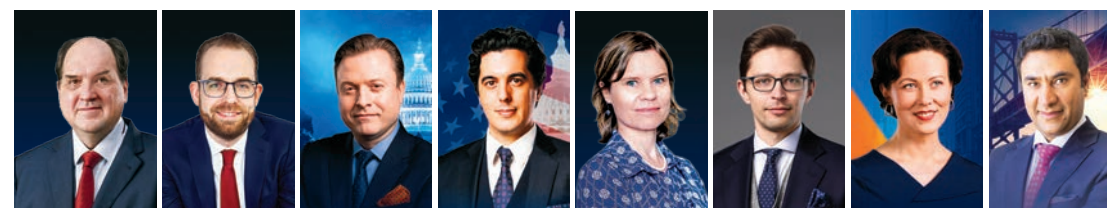
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"Savonarola Preaching Against Prodigality," circa 1879, by Ludwig von Langemantel. St. Bonaventure University, Bonaventure, N.Y.

SACRED ART

Michelangelo's HIDDEN ROOM

Reveals His Pious Heart

Continued from Page 1

During this time, he produced his first pagan motif, the "Battle of the Centaurs," commissioned by Lorenzo in 1492.

Why did the artist fall out of favor with the Medici some 40 years later?

To answer this question, however, we must consider a turbulent period when the people of Florence revolted against Medici rule, and the family was expelled from the city in 1494.

The heated events surrounding the conflict between Michelangelo and the Medici family reveal much about the artist's spiritual beliefs. In Michelangelo's later volumes of poetry, his devotion to his faith in God is increasingly expressed.

Revealing his attitude toward the beauty of the human body in his art, he wrote: "God, the Supreme Artist, reveals himself in the mortal veil of man. God, in His grace, also reveals Himself to me in no other aspect more clearly than in a beautiful human veil."

A Heated Conflict

But how did this disagreement with the Medici family come about, which forced Michelangelo into hiding in 1530?

The Medici family had grown from wealthy merchants to the most influential banking family in Europe in the late 13th century, even taking over the rule of what was then the Republic of Florence in 1434. Responsible for the rapid rise in its power acquisition was, among other things, the family's most important customer, the Vatican in Rome under Pope John XXIII (considered an anti-pope), a former pirate named Baldassare Cossa. He was one among three popes contesting for power at the time, but ultimately ended the Schism and retained power.

This economic connection between the Medici and Rome occurred at a time when the Vatican was losing moral authority and

was increasingly accused of corruption by clerics. Most notably, the Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola in Florence spoke out publicly about his skeptical attitude toward the head of the church.

Savonarola: A Prophet for Righteousness

Savonarola was no ordinary preacher; he won the people's trust through clear theological understanding and a way of preaching that spoke directly to the hearts of the masses. As his popularity grew, so did his criticism of the church.

He once accused the pope: "You have built a house of deceit. You have put a prostitute on the throne of Solomon. The Church has invited all who can pay to enter and do as they please. Those who do God's will are thrown out. O prostitute Church, you spread your lewdness everywhere from land to the sea."

In addition, Savonarola saw the Medici rulers as the cause of the moral decline and the abandonment of the Christian faith in Florence, as they had reinforced pagan rituals. With Savonarola's influence, the Florentine population began to revolt against the Medici rule. When Savonarola decided to side with French occupants in Florence in 1494, the Medici were forced to abandon their rule and the city.

On Jan. 13, 1495, Savonarola delivered his



CLAUDIO GIOVANNINI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

It is believed that Savonarola's teaching never left Michelangelo's mind.

(Left) A drawing by the Renaissance master Michelangelo, found in the secret room under the new sacristy of the Medici Chapel in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy.

(Right) The Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy, where Michelangelo hid from the Medici family for two months in 1530.

powerful Renovation Sermon to a large audience in the cathedral, Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore.

"She [Florence] is more glorious, powerful, and rich than ever before, spreading her wings farther than anyone can imagine. In the new Jerusalem that is Florence, peace and unity will reign."

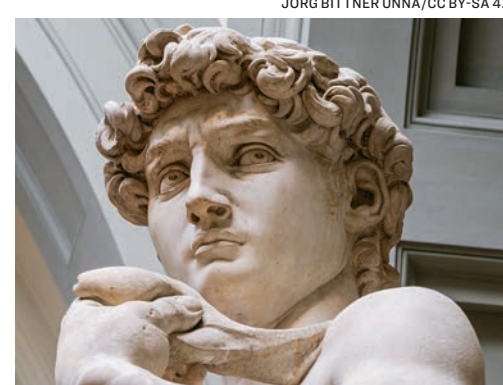
With the Medici's exile, Savonarola led Florence back to an independent republic, with the idea that Christ's laws should be the basis of its political and social life.

Savonarola's leadership did not last long as he began to preach ever more fiercely against the corruption of the church. For this, Pope Alexander VI excommunicated him in 1497. Despite his excommunication, Savonarola kept preaching in Florence, therefore the pope needed him punished and threatened the Florentines with an interdict, which would deny them most sacraments and Christian burials if they persisted in harboring him. On Palm Sunday in 1498, Savonarola's monastery, St. Mark's, was attacked by a screaming mob, and Savonarola was arrested and finally executed by hanging and burning in the center of the city that year.

All of Savonarola's writings—90 in number, from letters to huge volumes—were widely distributed across Europe by his followers. It is believed that Savonarola's teaching never left Michelangelo's mind.



CPH/GETTY IMAGES



In 1504, Michelangelo's "David" (detail) was placed at the center of Florence so that it gazed directly toward the Goliath: Rome. It is now in the Accademia Gallery of Florence.

Michelangelo's 'David' a Symbol for Independence

Savonarola saw sacred art as a tool for promoting this worldview and, at the same time, opposing secular art as being damaging. His view on art shaped those of the artists and the Florentine people.

Michelangelo's biblical figure of David, for example, played a significant role in symbolizing the defeat of the Medici family. The sculpture was commissioned mainly by members of the Florentine wool guild called Arte Della Lana a few years after the Medici's exile.

The statue was initially supposed to be set atop the Florence cathedral. However, instead of placing the 17-foot sculpture at the cathedral, in 1504 it was erected in the center of Florence, metaphorically facing the giant Goliath. Transcripts reveal a discussion around the provocative placement of the sculpture. With the town hall behind him, the hero looked as though he was preparing for battle. His gaze, deliberate, was fixed in the direction of Rome, the place to which Florence's recently deposed Medici rulers had fled.

According to University of Virginia history professor Paul Barolsky, in his journal article "Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and David" (2004), Italy had a longstanding tradition of portraying the biblical figure of David as a protector of both society and culture. Aiming to depict him as a guardian, Michelangelo rendered David taller, more handsome, and more muscular than Bible passages suggested.

After Savonarola's death, the Medici family regained influence by having Giovanni de Medici elected as the first Medici pope, Leo X. As a Medici descendant in his new position, he had the Medici family resume control of the government of Florence in 1512 and ended the republic.

But he did not win over the hearts of many of Savonarola's supporters and Florentines who supported democracy,

including Michelangelo.

This period in Michelangelo's life as a young man was formative both spiritually and artistically. He created his most iconic works, such as the "David" and the Sistine Chapel ceiling painting. Much like Savonarola, he saw himself as a servant of God, yet not through preaching but art.

In 1527, when a group of Florentines again resisted the authority of the Medici, Michelangelo was actively among them, standing up for independence. He even became director of fortifications for the republic. The Medici family again was driven into exile, and the revolt of the people restored the republic.

But the reestablishment did not last long. After bloody battles, the Medici resumed rule in 1531 through Pope Clement, also a Medici descendant. He reinstated Alessandro de Medici as the Duke of Florence.

With the "Medici Pope" and his family back in power, republican sympathizers were punished without fail. This would have included Michelangelo had he not retreated to his underground hideaway.

At this point, while Michelangelo feared for his life and hid from the wrath of the Medici family, scholars believe he kept himself busy with the works of art found in the room. These seem inspired by a collection of works that he had already produced as well as those that he had yet to complete.

Fortunately for Michelangelo, his fame and renown as well as his value to the pope as a commissioned artist, outweighed his transgressions. The pope agreed to spare Michelangelo's life on the condition that he would complete the Medici tomb in the Medici Chapel. Michelangelo received this message; he agreed, returned from hiding, and completed the work. After fulfilling the commission, he left his hometown of Florence for Rome in 1532 as the Florentine republic had ended, and therefore he never returned.

In Rome, he worked on another magnificent masterpiece, "The Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel. At this point in his life, Michelangelo had witnessed how a preacher gave his life in an attempt to follow the voice of God over the voice of the pope.

We can see in this powerful fresco how Michelangelo processed his experiences he had in Florence. It seems as if his sense of justice informs this painting with a fierce interpretation of God's judgment, vividly depicting the consequences of sin and the redemption for those who stand up for faith.

Johanna Schwaiger is a sculptor and program director of The New Masters Academy.

FINE ARTS

The Return of Spring and 2 Versailles Masterpieces

LORRAINE FERRIER

Spring is here. "Spring it is that clothes the glades and forests with leaves ... and the meadows unbind to Zephyrus's (the West Wind's) balmy breeze; the tender moisture avails for all," wrote Virgil in his "Georgics."

The Palace of Versailles couldn't have picked a more apt time to exhibit one of the last masterpieces that the Sun King, Louis XIV, commissioned, which is now back at Versailles, for

Carved in marble, the handsome winged youth Zephyrus, god of the west winds, gracefully descends from the heavens to greet his wife, Flora. Both are in the presence of "Love," who appears at the bottom of the sculptural group as a young boy perhaps showing the purity of love.

Ovid described how Zephyrus first saw the nymph Flora in Elysium and named her his bride. Ovid wrote as if he were Flora: "I have no complaints about my marriage. I enjoy perpetual spring: the year always shines, trees are leafing, the soil always foddens. I have a fruitful garden in my dowered fields, fanned by breezes, fed by limpid fountains. My husband filled it with well-bred flowers, saying: 'Have jurisdiction of the flower, goddess.'"

Not since the 18th century has "Zephyr, Flora, and Love," by Philippe Bertrand, René Frémin, and Jacques Bousseau been displayed at Versailles. The sculpture, along with another marble piece titled "Abundance," by Lambert-Sigisbert Adam, had been in private hands and their whereabouts were only confirmed in 2018. Both were in the Embassy of the Republic of Angola in Paris. The African country donated both works to Versailles so they can be enjoyed at the National Museum of the Palace of Versailles and the Trianon once again.

The sculptures can be seen in "The Recovered Masterpieces" exhibition at The Palace of Versailles until June 5. To find out more, visit ChateauVersailles.fr

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHE FOUIN/PALACE OF VERSAILLES



"Zephyr, Flora, and Love," 1769, by Philippe Bertrand, René Frémin, and Jacques Bousseau. Marble; 83 7/8 inches by 59 inches. Palace of Versailles.



Detail of "Zephyr, Flora, and Love," 1769, by Philippe Bertrand, René Frémin, and Jacques Bousseau. Marble; 83 7/8 inches by 59 inches. Palace of Versailles.



Section of Sistine Chapel ceiling, 1508–1512, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Fresco; 118 feet by 46 feet. Sistine Chapel, Rome.

SACRED ART

Sistine Ceiling's Prophets and Sibyls Ponder Heaven's Message

YVONNE MARCOTTE

The musty smell of lime plaster fills the air just under the chapel's ceiling. The artist works quickly on each section of the fresco as he stands on a scaffold platform 68 feet above the floor.

Along the perimeter of the high barrel vault of the Sistine Chapel, Renaissance artist Michelangelo Buonarroti paints 12 prophetic figures—seven male and five female. The artist depicts the figures as deep in thought, or reading, writing, and listening to God speaking to them.

Visitors today who stretch their necks as they bend their heads back to look at the figures may wonder if the prophets have a message for our time.

Ancient Seers

Michelangelo selected certain male prophets from the Old Testament: Jonah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah, Isaiah, and Daniel. We are familiar with their stories from the Bible. Jonah feared giving people bad news and tried to run away but was swallowed by a big fish. Jeremiah was said to have cried when he foretold of Jerusalem's destruction. Ezekiel also prophesied about Jerusalem's destruction but said Israel would be restored. Joel admonished people to repent. Zechariah prophesied that Jesus would enter Jerusalem. Isaiah told of Jesus's suffering. Daniel was known to interpret dreams and survived when thrown in a lion's den.

Not as well-known are the female seers, known as sibyls: Persian, Erythraean, Delphic, Cumaean, and Libyan. The Erythraean Sibyl gave prophecies at the Apollo Oracle at Erythrae in Ionia on the western coast of Turkey. The Persian Sibyl in northern Africa foretold the exploits of Alexander the Great. The Libyan Sibyl prophesied at the Oracle of Zeus-Ammon in the Libyan Desert. The Cumaean Sibyl presided at the

Apollo Oracle at Cumae, near Naples, Italy. The Delphic Sibyl made divinations at the famous oracle of Delphi, Greece. Michelangelo included the sibyls of the classical world to say that the prophetic message is meant not only for religious believers but also for all of mankind.

Balanced Composition

It was said that Michelangelo would not allow assistants to work on the ceiling with him because they did not have sufficient skill, so he did all the work. It took four years and was completed in 1512. Each powerful figure is shown within a painted marble enclosure. Aware of the height a figure was to be seen from, he used the technique of "di sotto in su" ("seen from below"), which changes the way the figures are seen from a distance.

The artist planned the placement of each figure with care. He placed Jeremiah, who prophesied Jesus's suffering, at the front of the composition and Jonah, whose life foretold Jesus's resurrection, at the other end. Along the long ends, each prophet is set across from a sibyl. The figures are seated on monumental thrones as they read manuscripts, books, or scrolls. Each figure has his or her name in Latin, below on a painted plaque.

Some are portrayed as young and vigorous; others have white hair and wrinkles yet are strongly built. Males and females alike have well-muscled bodies. Their robes and gowns are full and colorful and shown in depth. The artist's strong realistic painting technique shows shadows as the robes whip, swirl, and fold around the figures.

The figures appear alert and anxious as they absorb the message, yet what they read animates them. Perhaps they are concerned about mankind because they have been told what will happen. They ponder, consider, and mull over what they must tell mankind. They twist and turn while pondering God's messages.

The Libyan Sibyl highlights Michelangelo's mastery of the human body. A preliminary

chalk sketch shows how the artist depicted the body's muscular structure. "Her complex pose in the fresco, evidently requiring study in numerous drawings, plays on the arrested motion of her stepping down from the throne, while holding an enormous open book of prophecy which she is about to close," as stated in a Metropolitan Museum analysis. We can see how the body maintains its balance in the beautifully extended big toe as the figure twists around.

The figures respond to voices, as shown in the image of Ezekiel. As if aware of God speaking to him, he lifts his head and looks out. An invisible breeze ruffles his cloak as he sits up, alert.

The main figures in each enclosure are not alone. The artist placed two putti, or young boys, to serve each prophet; some light candles and others hold manuscripts. Around each marble enclosure are male nudes, which Michelangelo called "ignudi," but their purpose is unclear.

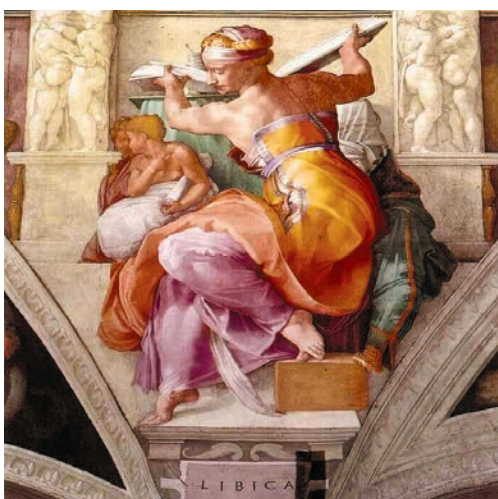
The project exhausted the artist who at that time was at the peak of his career and in great demand. He is reputed to have said: "I felt as old and as weary as Jeremiah. I was only 37, yet friends did not recognize the old man I had become."

Message of Hope

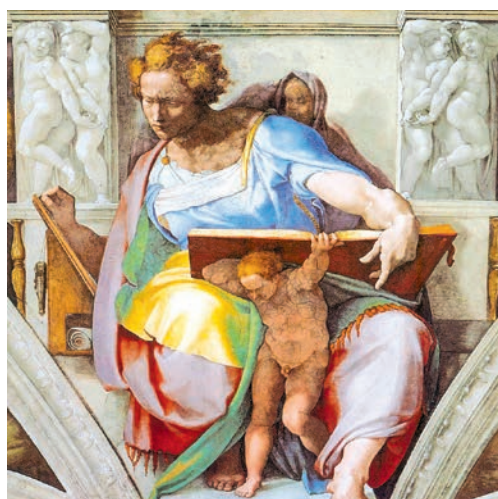
At the darkest hour when evil infects all aspects of life, prophets urge people to adjust their moral compass, embrace virtue, and repent of their sins. When prophets give dire warnings for people to change their ways, they do indeed make people very uncomfortable. Eugene H. Peterson said, "The task of the prophet is not to smooth things over but to make things right."

For millennia, people have awaited the Chosen One who will free mankind from the forces of evil. Those who turn to goodness can rest easy when looking up at the majestic figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Their message gives hope that the best is yet to come.

Along the perimeter of the high barrel vault of the Sistine Chapel, Renaissance artist Michelangelo Buonarroti paints 12 prophetic figures—seven male and five female.



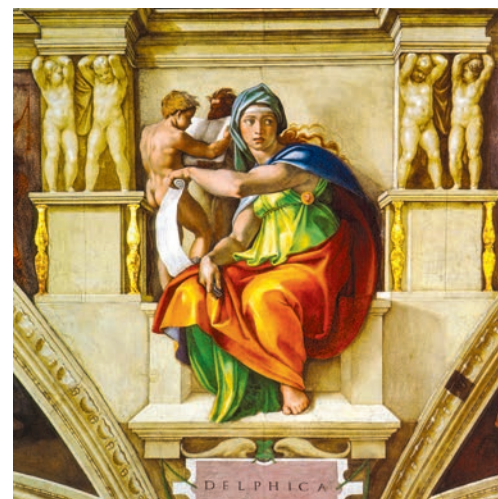
Libyan Sibyl, 1508–1512, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Fresco; 155 5/8 inches by 149 5/8 inches. Sistine Chapel, Rome.



Daniel, 1508–1512, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Fresco; 155 5/8 inches by 149 5/8 inches. Sistine Chapel, Rome.



Ezekiel, 1508–1512, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Fresco; 155 5/8 inches by 149 5/8 inches. Sistine Chapel, Rome.



Delphic Sibyl, 1508–1512, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. Fresco; 155 5/8 inches by 149 5/8 inches. Sistine Chapel, Rome.

AMERICAN TREASURES

Preston Sturges: Master of Comical Mayhem

STEPHEN OLES

Critic James Agee called him "the most gifted American working in film." A 1940s *Vogue* article claimed that his name was more familiar to moviegoers than Lubitsch or Hitchcock. Yet today, everyone knows Hitchcock but far fewer remember the man who, in only four years, wrote and directed seven of Hollywood's most sparkling and original comedies: Preston Sturges. His genius lit up Hollywood like a shooting star in the night sky and burned out almost as quickly.

He was born Edmund Preston Biden in 1898, becoming Sturges after his stepfather, a Chicago stockbroker, adopted him. His mother, Mary, took little Preston with her to Europe where she knew many artists and celebrities, or dropped him off at a series of fancy boarding schools—an upbringing that, along with his 1930 marriage to General Foods heiress Eleanor Hutton, familiarized him with the millionaires, foreigners, and eccentrics who would later populate his films. (Eleanor grew up in her family's 126-room Palm Beach mansion, Mar-a-Lago, which would eventually be purchased by Donald Trump.)

After a stint in the Army, Sturges tried a number of jobs before settling on playwrighting. He had one hit play on Broadway, but the ones that followed flopped. He was discouraged and going broke.

When a Hollywood offer came in 1932, Sturges was ready to leave New York.

Hollywood Calls

The movie business lured him—as it did F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Dorothy Parker, and many other East Coast writers—with the promise of a steady, Depression-proof paycheck.

Producer Jesse Lasky called Sturges's first screenplay "the most perfect script I'd ever seen" and shot it without changing a word. "The Power and the Glory" (1933) tells the life story of a powerful tycoon (Spencer Tracy) with voice-over narration and nonchronological flashbacks. Sound familiar? In the 1970s, critic Pauline Kael popularized the idea that "Citizen Kane" owed much to the earlier film, but Orson Welles said in a late interview that he never even saw it. However "Kane" co-writer Herman Mankiewicz was a friend of Sturges, so it may have been an influence after all.

"The Power and the Glory" wasn't a hit, but its storytelling was so novel that the studio publicity department made up a word for it: "narratage." Sturges, always the inventor, would throw audiences cinematic curveballs for the rest of his career. He cooked up other inventions in Hollywood, too, including a new kind of diesel engine and cup holders that kept drinks upright on rocking boats.

During the 1930s, 10 of Sturges's scripts were filmed and he worked on many others. His favorite themes emerged: success, luck, high society, and fascinating women with minds of their own. Politically, Sturges leaned conservative, but he kept political preaching out of his scripts, except when he made fun of it.

Irked at what directors did with his screenplays, Sturges became the first Hollywood writer to become a director himself, paving the way for John Huston, Billy Wilder, and Joseph Mankiewicz to make the same leap. He did it by selling a script to Paramount for \$10 on the condition that he would direct it. "The Great McGinty," a satire about a nobody who becomes a mayor, then a governor by accident, was a hit and won an Oscar. Its cast was the beginning of what became known as the Sturges stock company—actors like the pugnacious William Demarest, whom he would use in film after film.

Golden Movies

So began Sturges's golden years. Between 1940 and 1944, he created seven startlingly inventive comedies in a row. In the superb "The Lady Eve" (1941) a card sharp (Barbara Stanwyck) cons the naive heir to a brewery fortune (Henry Fonda). Falling in love with him, she resolves to go straight. But when Fonda's character learns about her past and breaks off the romance, she takes revenge by posing as a British aristocrat, marrying him, and raking him over the coals on their honeymoon. The play works but she soon regrets it, drops the deception, and all ends happily.

Sturges always claimed that he hated high culture since his mother had dragged him through every museum and concert hall in Europe. But his early years and lifelong reading gave him a knowledge of history, literature, and music that distinguishes his dialog as much as his love



The stars of "The Palm Beach Story" (1942). (L-R) Joel McCrea, Mary Astor, Claudette Colbert, and Rudy Vallée.

Between 1940 and 1944, Preston Sturges created seven startlingly inventive comedies in a row.



A publicity shot of Spencer Tracy and Colleen Moore for "The Power and the Glory," Preston Sturges's first screenplay.



Film director Preston Sturges, looking serious despite his being known for outlandish comedies.

of American idioms and slang. He wore his literacy lightly and would follow the most sophisticated repartee with ridiculous pratfalls. This way, he pleased viewers who enjoyed witty dialog as well as those who preferred slapstick.

Then came "Sullivan's Travels" (1941). A rich Hollywood director of silly comedies (Joel McCrea) poses as a hobo to learn about poverty so he can make a serious, socially conscious film. A young actress (Veronica Lake) accompanies him as he gets into more trouble than he anticipated, realizing finally that comedy may have more value than pretentious, preachy films that win Oscars. The movie daringly mixes genres: satire, melodrama, gritty realism, and farce.

In "The Palm Beach Story" (1942), my favorite Sturges film, a beautiful young woman (Claudette Colbert) races to Florida to find a millionaire who will underwrite her inventor husband's latest brainchild. When her husband (McCrea again) follows her, she passes him off as her brother and both become mixed up with a wealthy oddball (Rudy Vallée) and his man-hungry sister (Mary Astor). In between a mystifying prologue and epilogue involving identical

twins, the film has more laughs per square inch than any screwball comedy this side of "Bringing Up Baby."

The miracle of "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek" (1944) is that Sturges got his crazy story past the censors. A girl (Betty Hutton) passes out at a wild party, marries a departing serviceman in her stupor, and the next morning can't remember his name. Farcical complications mount until she gives birth to sextuplets, becomes a national heroine, and ends up with a pure-hearted nebbish who's loved her since childhood. The premise is cheeky but, as *The New York Times* noted, the film is "so innocently amusing, so full of candor, that no one could take offense."

Sturges directed six more movies of declining quality and died in 1959, working on his autobiography. McCrea's final speech in "Sullivan's Travels" tells us what the director learned, and what we continue to learn from his marvelous films:

"There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that that's all some people have? It isn't much, but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan."



Veronica Lake and Joel McCrea in "Sullivan's Travels" (1941).



Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda in "The Lady Eve" (1941).

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TV REVIEW

Samuel Jackson Shows His Range

JOE BENDEL

Like Charlie Gordon in “Flowers for Algernon,” Ptolemy Grey’s experimental mind-enhancing treatment will only be temporary. However, he fully understands that. Grey is willing to be a guinea pig, to buy himself time to finish some unfinished business. With the inevitable return of his dementia looming, the elderly man strives to find his grandnephew’s murderer in creator-screenwriter Walter Mosley’s six-episode “The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey,” adapted from his own novel.

Physically, Grey remains surprisingly healthy for his 93 years, but his mind is nearly entirely shrouded in fog. He still sort of recognizes his grandnephew Reggie Lloyd, who does his best to care for Grey. The rest of his family is repulsed by his unstable state of mind and his slovenly living conditions, so nobody even bothers to inform him of Reggie’s untimely death. They just have him collected for the wake.

Grandnephew and Grandniece

Before Reggie was shot down in an alleyway, he did one last service for his great-uncle. On the advice of Grey’s regular GP, Reggie booked him an appointment with Dr. Rubin, who has developed a revolutionary treatment for dementia. He would have missed it were it not for Robyn, his new caretaker. During the course of the series, she will be reminded over and over that she is not truly family—but not by Grey.

The orphaned teenager had been staying with Grey’s grandniece Nicie, a good friend of Robyn’s mother, who recently died from a drug overdose. Unfortunately, the unwelcome overtures from Nicie’s thuggish son force her to seek accommodations elsewhere. As it happens, Grey has space and the need for a care-giver, at least until Dr. Rubin’s treatments take effect.

Ignorance was never bliss for Grey. He was constantly tormented by fragmentary memories of his “Uncle” Coydog, hounding him over his questionable custodianship of a great unnamed treasure that he was apparently entrusted with as a young boy in the Jim Crow South. Eventually, Grey’s

memories will return, but he must also investigate Reggie’s shooting quickly, while his enhanced faculties hold up.

Flashbacks

If you enjoy flashbacks, this series will be more fun for you than an army of Baby Yodas. Yet, in this case, they are all warranted and integral to Mosley’s conception. “Last Days” is not truly a mystery, even though Grey has an investigation of sorts to pursue (and that is the genre Mosley is most often associated with). Mosley’s book and series could almost be considered science fiction in the way Daniel Keyes’s “Flowers for Algernon” was when it was originally published. Regardless, there is no question that most of the mysteries and conflicts are set entirely within Grey’s mind.

That all puts many demands on the star, Samuel L. Jackson, but he rises to the challenge of playing Grey at multiple ages. His fans will be happy to see his familiar swagger and hear him deliver plenty of highly, attitudinally, charged lines, in keeping with his established screen persona. Yet, he also convincingly portrays Grey at his lowest, frailest, and most vulnerable moments.

Nevertheless, Jackson’s best scenes involve Grey verbally sparring with Walton Goggins (of “Justified”) as Dr. Rubin, whom Grey dubs “Satan” due to the Faustian nature of his treatment. Unlike the main character of Keyes’s novel (and “Charly,” the 1968 film adaptation), Grey fully understands the temporary nature of Rubin’s treatment and he is willing to accept it, but



Dominique Fishback and Samuel L. Jackson in “The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey.”



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At 93 years old, Ptolemy Grey’s mind is nearly entirely shrouded in fog.

‘The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey’

Directors: Ramin Bahrani, Debbie Allen, Hanelle Culpepper, Guillermo Navarro

Starring: Samuel L. Jackson, Dominique Fishback, Omar Benson Miller, Marsha Stephanie Blake, Damon Gupton

Running Time: 6 episodes

MPAA Rating: TV-MA

Release Date: March 11, 2022

★★★★★

the resulting dynamic between Grey and Rubin is ambiguously wary. Still, it is a treat to watch the two men face-off, given their commanding but distinctly different screen presences.

Actor and symphony conductor Damon Gupton is also quite powerful as Coydog, who constantly rebukes the guilt-ridden, dementia-addled Grey, but his work eventually assumes grandly tragic dimensions as we learn his full backstory through flashbacks. Dominique Fishback is also quite impressive as Robyn, who is forced to confront so many tribulations at a distressingly young age. (Frankly, she looks about half her reported age.)

The battery of directors, including Debbie Allen, Guillermo Navarro (Guillermo del Toro’s former cinematographer), and Ramin Bahrani (“The White Tiger”), always take a sensitive approach to issues of aging and abuse.

This is not a flashy series, but it packs an emotional punch. Highly recommended for fans of Jackson and Mosley, “The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey” started streaming on March 11 on Apple TV+.

Joe Bendel writes about independent film and lives in New York. To read his most recent articles, visit [JBSpins.blogspot.com](https://www.jbspins.com)

▲ Samuel L. Jackson stars in “The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey.”



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