

CHAPTER
17

Section 1

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Agony and the Ecstasy*
by Irving Stone

American author Irving Stone's novel The Agony and the Ecstasy traces the life of famed Renaissance sculptor and painter Michelangelo Buonarroti. In the following excerpt, Michelangelo has been commissioned by Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome; however, he and his assistant Michi get off to a shaky start with this daunting project. As you read, think about the different problems Michelangelo encounters and how he solves them.

He began with the Deluge, a large panel toward the entrance of the chapel. By March he had the cartoon blown up and ready to be transferred to the ceiling. Winter had not released its grip on Rome. The Sistine was bitterly cold. A hundred braziers could not heat its lowest areas. He wore his warm wool stockings, brache and shirt.

Rosselli, who had left for Orvieto for a profitable commission, had trained Michi in the mixing of the plaster and the method of applying it. Michelangelo helped him carry the sacks of lime, sand and pozzolana, volcanic tufa dust, up the steep wall ladders to the top of the scaffolding. Here Michi made his mix. Michelangelo was dissatisfied with the tawny color caused by the pozzolana, adding more lime and ground marble. He and Michi then climbed the series of three receding platforms that Rosselli had built so that they could plaster and paint the top of the rolling vault. Michi laid an area of intonaco, then held the cartoon. Michelangelo used the stick, charcoal bag, red ochre for connecting lines.

Michi descended, set to work grinding colors below. Michelangelo was now on his top platform, sixty feet above the floor. He had been thirteen when he stood for the first time on the scaffolding in Santa Maria Novella, alone on a peak above the chapel and the world. Now he was thirty-four, and now, as then, he suffered vertigo. The Sistine seemed so hollow from up here, with his head just one foot below the ceiling. He smelled the wet plaster, the pungence of his freshly ground paints. He turned from his view of the marble floor, picked up a brush, squeezed it between the fingers and thumb of his left hand, remembering that he would have to keep his colors liquid this early in the morning. . . .

He had watched Ghirlandaio paint enough panels to know that he should begin at the top and work his way downward on either side; but he

lacked experience to paint professionally, and so he began at the dominant point, the one that interested him the most: the extreme left end, the last piece of green earth showing above the flood, the trunk of a storm-twisted tree extending toward what would later be Noah's Ark, with the last of perishing humanity climbing the banks: a woman carrying a child in her arms, an older one clutching her leg; a husband carrying his distraught wife on his back; a vanishing trail of heads, old and young, about to be submerged in the rising waters; and above them all, a young man climbing and clutching at the tree trunk in a desperate effort to gain the highest vantage point.

He painted with his head and shoulders pulled sharply back, his eyes staring straight up. Paint dripped onto his face, the moisture of the wet plaster oozed out and dripped in his eyes. His arms and back tired quickly from the strain of the unnatural position. During the first week he allowed Michi to lay only modest areas of intonaco each day, proceeding cautiously, experimenting not only with the contortions of the figures but with a wide variety of flesh tones and the colors of the blue, green and rose robes of those who still retained their clothing. He knew that these small areas caused too many seams, that at this rate Granacci's estimate of forty years would prove more accurate than his own resolution of four. Yet he learned as he went along; this panel of life and death in violent action bore little relation to the Ghirlandaio still lifes. He was content to feel his way slowly until he had mastered his medium.

At the end of the first week a biting north wind arose. Its whistling kept him awake most of the night. In the morning he walked to the Sistine with his scarf wound around his mouth, not sure, even as he climbed the ladder, whether he could get his hands warm enough to hold a brush. But when he reached the top of Rosselli's highest platform he

saw that there was no need to do so: his panel was ruined. His plaster and paints were not drying. Instead, there was a moist dripping at the edges of his stormy tree, the man mounting the bank, a bundle of clothes on his shoulder. The oozing moisture was creating a mold which was creeping over the paint, slowly absorbing it. Behind him he heard Michi ask in a choked voice:

“I made the plaster bad?”

It was a long time before he could reply; he felt too sick.

“It was me. I don’t know how to mix paints for fresco. It’s been too many years since Ghirlandaio’s. Granacci and the others did the work on my first prophet; all I did was apply the paint.”

He stumbled down the ladder, tears in his eyes, made his way blindly to the Papal palace, waited for an interminable time in a cold anteroom. When he was admitted he stood forlornly before Julius.

“What is it, my son? You look ill.”

“I have failed.”

“In what way?”

“What I have done is spoiled.”

“So quickly?”

“I told Your Holiness it was not my art.”

“Lift up your head, Buonarroti. I have never seen you . . . crushed. I prefer you storming at me.”

“The ceiling has begun to drip. The moisture is causing spots of mold.”

“Can’t you dry them?”

“I know not how, Holiness. My colors are disappearing into the mold. They are being consumed by the salty edges.”

“I can’t believe that you would fail . . .” He turned to a groom. “Go to Sangallo’s house, tell him to inspect the Sistine ceiling at once, and bring me his report.”

Michelangelo retreated to the cold outer room and the hard waiting bench. This was the worst defeat he had ever suffered. Much as he hated giving his years to fresco, he had nonetheless evolved a masterly conception. He was not accustomed to failure; it was the only thing in his lexicon that was worse than being forced to work in alien mediums. That the Pope would be through with him there could be no doubt, even though his collapse as a

fresco painter had nothing to do with his qualities as a marble sculptor. He would certainly not be allowed to carve the tomb. When an artist failed this abjectly, he was finished. The news of his failure would be all over Italy in a matter of days. Instead of returning to Florence in triumph he would creep home like a beaten dog, the tail of his pride between his legs. Florence would not like that. They would consider that he had undermined their position in the art world. Gonfaloniere Soderini would feel let down; he would have been a liability at the Vatican instead of an asset. Again he would have wasted a full year of his productive life.

He was buried so deep in his gloom that he did not see Sangallo come in. He was hustled into the throne room before he had a chance to collect himself.

“Sangallo, what have you found?” the Pope demanded.

“Nothing serious, Holiness. Michelangelo applied the lime in too watery a state, and the north wind caused it to exude.”

“But it’s the same composition Ghirlandaio used in Florence,” Michelangelo cried. “I watched it being prepared. . . .”

“Roman lime is made of travertine. It does not dry as readily. The pozzolana Rosselli taught you to mix with it stays soft, and often breaks into an efflorescence while drying. Substitute marble dust for pozzolana, use less water with this lime. All will be well.”

“What about my colors? Must I tear out that part of the ceiling?”

“No. In time the air will consume the mold. Your colors won’t be hurt.”

Had Sangallo come back and reported that the ceiling was ruined, he would have been on the road to Florence by noon. Now he could return to his vault, though the events of the morning had given him an excruciating headache. . . .

For thirty days he painted from light to darkness, completing the Sacrifice of Noah, the four titanic male nudes surrounding it, the Erythraean Sibyl on her throne, and the Prophet Isaiah in the pendentive opposite, returning home at night to enlarge the cartoon of the Garden of Eden. For thirty days he slept in his clothes, without taking off even his boots; and when at the completion of the

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section, utterly spent, he had Michi pull his boots off for him, the skin came away with them.

He fed off himself. When he grew dizzy from standing and painting with his head and shoulders thrown back, his neck arched so that he could peer straight upward, his arms aching in every joint from the vertical effort, his eyes blurred from the dripping paint even though he had learned to paint through slits and to blink them shut with each brush stroke as he did against flying marble chips, he had Rosselli make him a still higher platform, the fourth on top of the scaffolding. He painted sitting down, his thighs drawn up tight against his belly for balance, his eyes a few inches from the ceiling, until the unpadded bones of his buttocks became so bruised and sore he could no longer endure the agony. Then he lay flat on his back, his knees in the air, doubled over as tightly as possible against his chest to steady his painting arm. Since he no longer bothered to shave, his beard became an excellent catchall for the constant drip of paint and water. No matter which way he leaned, crouched, lay or knelt, on his feet, knees or back, it was always in strain.

Then he thought he was going blind. A letter arrived from Buonarroto, and when he tried to read it he could see nothing but a blur. He put the letter down, washed his face, ate a few forkfuls of the overcooked pasta Michi had made for him, went back to the letter. He could not decipher a word.

He threw himself on his bed, sorely beset. What was he doing to himself? He had refused to paint the simple commission the Pope had requested, and now he would come out of this chapel a gnarled, twisted, ugly, blind dwarf, deformed and aged by his own colossal stupidity. What Torrigiani had done to his face, the vault would do to his body. He would carry its scars to his dying day. Why couldn't he have let well enough alone? He would have made his peace with the Pope, been back in Florence long since, enjoying dinner with the Company of the Cauldron, living in his comfortable house, carving the Hercules.

Sleepless, racked with pain, homesick, lonely, he rose in the inky blackness, lit a candle, and on

the back of an old sketch tried to lighten his mood by pouring out his woes:

I've grown a goitre by dwelling in this den—
as cats from stagnant streams in Lombardy,
or in what other land they hap to be—
which drives the belly close beneath the chin:

My beard turns up to heaven; my nape falls in,
fixed on my spine: my breast-bone visibly
grows like a harp: a rich embroidery
bedews my face from brush-drops thick and thin.

My loins into my paunch like levers grind:
my buttock like a crupper bears my weight;
my feet unguided wander to and fro;

In front my skin grows loose and long; behind
by bending it becomes more taut and strait;
crosswise I strain me like a Syrian bow: . . .

Come then, try
to succor my dead pictures and my fame;
since foul I fare and painting is my shame.

Research Options

1. **Using Research in Writing** Find out more about Michelangelo. Then work with classmates to plan and arrange a bulletin board display about his life. Include a brief biographical sketch and pictures of his works of art. Use captions to identify each work of art you use in the display.
2. **Writing Expository Paragraphs** Research how frescoes are created. Write a brief step-by-step explanation of the process, including definitions of such terms as *pozzolana* and *intonaco*, and share it with a small group of classmates.
3. **Perceiving Relationships** Find pictures of the Sistine Chapel frescoes. Match the images you see with descriptions in this passage from *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. For example, find depictions of the Deluge, the Sacrifice of Noah, the Garden of Eden, the Prophet Isaiah, and so forth.