

# Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

## General description

The decoration is split into three main sections: the *Ancestors of Christ up to Abraham* are depicted in the lunettes along the walls; along the outer edges of the ceiling run the vaulting cells, alternating with thrones on which *Prophets and Sibyls* are seated, while four *SCENES FROM THE BIBLE* appear in the four pendentives. The middle and principle section consists of nine scenes drawn from the OLD TESTAMENT, separated by mock architectural features peopled with *NAKED FIGURES* and other *DECORATIVE FIGURES*.

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The Sistine Chapel, in the Vatican Palace in Rome, was erected in its present form by Pope Sixtus IV around 1475 and dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption. In fact, a fresco of the *Assumption* had been painted on the altar wall by Perugino (and so on the same wall on which the *Judgment* would later be painted). *Scenes from the Old and New Testament* had been painted on the other walls by Botticelli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Cosimo Rosselli, Signorelli, and others. The ceiling was decorated to resemble a starry sky by Piermatteo d'Amelia. It was this decoration that was destroyed to make room for Buonarroti's work. On May 10th, 1508, Michelangelo recorded that he had received five hundred ducats for this undertaking, on which he was about to start working. The artist then began to produce the designs, for the «workshop» that he had requested from Florence was not due to arrive until the fall. Sources tell us that none of the painters he summoned was able to start working. Dissatisfied with their initial attempts, Michelangelo dismissed them all right away and continued alone, assisted only by apprentices who added the finishing touches. The pope had originally asked Michelangelo to represent the twelve apostles in order to set the seal on the theme, already depicted on the walls, of the legitimacy of the pontiff's divine mandate. The figures were to be set in the corbels and the ceiling decorated with geometric motifs. The appearance of mold and the disputes with his collaborators led to the destruction of what had already been done and to the master resuming work on his own. Some letters written in 1509 and 1510 suggest that half the ceiling was complete and had already been unveiled. By the beginning of 1511, the decoration of the ceiling was finished and work began on the lunettes. These were completed at the end of 1512, the year of the chapel's reopening. We know that the artist started from the door and moved toward the altar. This means that he began with the scenes of Noah, following a course that ran directly contrary to the chronological sequence of the scenes. A metaphorical significance has been attached to this fact, linked to the stages of spiritual life. According to this interpretation, he wanted to represent first of all humanity prior to the revelation (lunettes, vaulting cells, pendentives), then the moment of understanding (seers and naked figures), and finally the direct relationship with heaven (Bible scenes). So the scenes should be read in a sequence running from bottom to top and from the door to the altar.