

ART

Art Restoration: The Sistine Chapel

by Thomas Molnar

The present controversy around the restoration of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling prompts the following reflections on restorative work in general, and that of our time in particular.

Our age will be known by future historians as one in which all certitudes were questioned, while the True and the Good were on the defensive. Beauty, also tottering, still rallies the largest number of enthusiasts. The onslaughts against it—tasteless monuments, purposeful wrecks in metal and cement in public parks, puzzles on museum and exhibit walls—are violently resented by lovers of art, at least those bold enough to go against popular approval. The restoration work on ancient masterpieces also begins to attract attention because of its increasing abuse.

Paul Valéry spoke of civilizations being mortal; we are now aware that the art of the past, safe from "death," is nevertheless vulnerable to cleansing, the use of new chemicals, to the indiscriminate removal of layers on painting, to retouching, as well as the search for the alleged original lines and colors. Although motivated by good intentions, many restorers are tempted to play the demiurge and "know better" than the work's creator, whether Leonardo, Rembrandt, or Michelangelo. The trouble is that misapplied zeal carries them away, as restorers become competitors against the artist whose work they ought to serve. This is how we get statements like: "Emotional and subjective considerations must not be permitted to intrude upon science!" This by Gianluigi Colalucci, chief restorer now working on the Sistine Chapel.

Before anything else, a cultural misunderstanding should be dispelled: The great masterpieces are not embodied only in the work themselves, as they appear, localized and dated. They have also evolved a life of their own during the cen-

turies or millennia since their coming into existence. The "search for the original" is merely a modern prejudice, although it may look like a reasonable and an attractive notion to which we all are impelled, partly by curiosity, partly by the desire to meet the *illo tempore*. Yet this search may also be an ill-conceived enterprise, considering the probability that the artist himself foresaw the effect of *passing time*, and would be the first to protest against a periodic return to an increasingly hypothetical "original," or to what his work was like in the exact moment he put down his brush or chisel.

Each Gothic cathedral was built over the decades, indeed centuries, by successive patrons, master-masons, teams of architects and workers. It was the common religious inspiration of merging centuries that created unity of conception and style, not this or that master. Appropriately, no one individual signed the work—the final product may not have exactly conformed to the first blueprint. Similarly, Michelangelo planned the *lunettes* and the barrel vault ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to serve as transcendent inspiration at religious ceremonies for many centuries. He knew that what popes and priests would see when looking up and around would not be quite the same in the second decade of the 16th century as in remote future times and generations. More concretely, he knew that there would be the chemical reactions in his materials compounded by candle smoke, the breathing of multitudes, and the climatic and seasonal changes.

What Michelangelo could not know—in contrast to us—is that taste not only changes but may also one day be so corrupted that it would try to erase *time*. Watch indeed the contemporary infatuation with hermeneutics—in plain language, the search for hidden motives (like "investigative journalism" in Washington): What did the writer, artist, scholar, thinker *really* want to express? Did he know exactly what he wanted, was he aware that it was not he who wanted it, but his social class, degree of wealth, his race, his hidden interests, the structure of the language he spoke? The game around the "masters of suspicion" fascinates our contemporaries, the Merleau-Pontys, the Gadammers, the Freuds, the Ricoeurs. Was Shakespeare Shake-

speare? Did Leonardo paint a self-portrait under the features of Mona Lisa? And now: Was Michelangelo responsible only for the fresco painted on the walls, while an unknown super-Michelangelo painted, decades later, the musculature, the gradation of light and shadow, the wrestling of God and man?

The theory about this mysterious Other, which in a way authorizes the present restorers to erase perceived non-Michelangellian layers and layers of grime, is flatly contradicted by art-chronicler number one, Giorgio Vasari, the painter's contemporary. When in Rome, Vasari writes, Michelangelo painted every day, rain or shine, in great discomfort from constantly looking up. He remained on his 60-foot-high scaffolding night or day, eating and sleeping there, "but in the ardor of labor he felt no fatigue and cared for no discomfort." More, he talked back to the pope (Julius II, no namby-pamby, or a "Hamlet"), who threatened to have him cast down if he did not finish the job by the agreed date. "I shall finish," Michelangelo replied, "when I am satisfied in my artistic sense." And so he did.

All this explains why a work of art today (this is also true of music as new instruments are invented) is not quite the same as it was in its creator's atelier, when it was blessed by qualities of survival. Time does effect some erosion and decrepitude, but it also brings maturation. Most importantly, not every age should regard itself as competent to restore great art. It is one thing to rebuild baroque Dresden after its barbaric destruction, quite another to meddle with the wear and tear of centuries. Contemporary taste, working with surviving original blueprints of public buildings, streets, or façades, cannot do much harm; but looking at the Sistine frescoes *before* and *after*, we become painfully aware that contemporary taste favors the style of posters, large, brutally colored surfaces, geometric designs. The tourist wants to see quickly and superficially and carry home a bundle of snapshots. In the Sistine Chapel where he dislocates his neck in the effort to look upward (this, the crowds of tourists, not even a Michelangelo could foresee), the restorers may have wished—am I guilty of hermeneutics?—to alleviate the neck-breaking exercise. At any rate, the

cleansed sections appear splashy, ready to be seen from a distance.

Is this still Michelangelo? That is a hard question to answer. Art critic Alexander Eliot, mural painter Frank Mason, Prof. James Beck of Columbia, art dealer Roland Feldman, plus the 15 most prominent American painters who signed a letter of protest to the Vatican, agree that the present restoration is guilty of what I would call "puritanism," the earlier-mentioned impulse to erase time. To which the chief theoretician of the Sistine restoration, Fabrizio Mancinelli, answered that Michelangelo, a Florentine, was trained in the rapid work that the fresco painting demands. Since the fresco dried in one day ("*giomata*"), the artist could move on to the next. The answer to this argument is that Michelangelo was working in Rome (he even rejected advice by his fellow Florentines who had come to visit him) in whose damp and marshy air he knew he had to use another technique and paint slowly, repeatedly, devotedly, expressing his real vision *a secco*. . . . The fresco was only a working outline, the struggle of genius was super-added. There is proof, even outside Vasari's description, that the master worked slowly, with a light attached to his hat, "his loins penetrating to his paunch"—these are his own words—"his rump a crupper as a counterweight." He painted over and over, reworked, and in the process he renewed Renaissance painting. How are we to conclude that this daring man would have been content with bare sketches, that he would have refrained from his titanic struggle with angels, saints, sibyls, and prophets?

Let us repeat that the times are not propitious for large-scale restoration except when mere technical know-how is involved, as in the protection of the Parthenon. And our times are not propitious for restoration because they are not creative times. Our contemporaries believe in nothing—how could they think along the lines of great creators, whose art, no matter how perfected, was in their minds only a reflection of the divine? There is something typical and symbolic, certainly not incongruous, in the fact that the restoration is partly paid for by the Nippon Television Network Corporation (three million dollars), in exchange for rights to film the process. Commercialism does not just mix here with beauty and spirituality; it obscenely interferes with both, while strengthening the Restorers' Faction. Let's face it, the latter

have the support of an international pressure group of museum directors heavily engaged in restorations (the art must shine to attract visitors and donors, mustn't it?), art critics, professors, publishers. . . .

A compromise? Perhaps; slow work, frequent interruptions in order to survey the effects before they became irreversible. One illustration: Restoration on Leonardo's *Last Supper* in Milan is planned to take 12 years; the much vaster Sistine Chapel is supposed to be completed in the same amount of time. There is an evident rush. Yet why should the domain of beauty not also be subject to moral prudence? Moral prudence combined with aesthetic reverence would reassure those who want not only to restore, but also to preserve.

*Thomas Molnar is a professor of French at Brooklyn College.
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HISTORY

Lies, Damned Lies, and Fossils

by Philip Jenkins

Not for the first time in recent years, American history is the subject of a ferocious political controversy, which ultimately grows out of the national obsession with race. What is new about this particular battle is the chronological setting: We are not dealing here with the New Deal, Reconstruction, or the slave trade, but with a period inconceivably distant, before there was a United States; indeed, long before human beings had dreamed of building pyramids or ziggyrats. Recent archaeological discoveries have thrown doubt upon everything we thought we knew about human origins in the New World, blowing large holes in the scientific orthodoxy of the last few decades. It is not surprising to find the new facts challenged by a rear guard of traditionally minded scholars, whose whole careers were invested in an older model, but what is alarming is that the federal government and even its Armed Forces have become utterly committed to yesterday's orthodoxy, to the extent of resorting to chicanery and intimidation: In short, the Clinton administration has

decided to declare war on American archaeology. Even more repugnant, it is doing so in pursuit of doctrines of racial purity. How exactly did we get into such a moral and intellectual quagmire?

To understand this mess, we need to appreciate the traditional view of how human beings reached the Americas. From the 1920's, the standard view was that the New World had no human population before about 15,000 years ago, when hunters following big game trekked across the land bridge which then united Siberia and Alaska. . . . They rapidly spread across the continent, leaving as traces stone spearheads of the sort first discovered at Clovis, New Mexico. Other population waves came in over the following millennia, but always over the land bridge, so that all Indian populations in the Americas, north and south, ultimately derived from these Siberian migrants.

The Clovis theory of New World settlement worked magnificently so long as the amount of contrary evidence was small enough to be controlled and, above all, no material evidence of earlier settlement appeared. Partly, this was achieved by an unconscious conspiracy: Archaeologists now freely admit that when they reached Clovis levels at a particular site, they simply stopped digging, because they knew in their hearts that nothing else could be there. Unfortunately, there almost certainly was older material which was simply ignored. In the last decade or two, an intellectual revolution has ensued that indicates, first, that people have been in the Americas for much longer than we had hitherto thought: probably for 30,000 or 40,000 years, and possibly for 50,000 or 60,000. Second, the remains of these ancient people are, frankly, in the wrong places. If they were all Siberian newcomers, it is odd that their ancient remains should be turning up more in South America than in the north, as much in the eastern half of the United States as in the west.

Trying to explain these inconvenient facts, scholars are now proposing an array of theories which, had they been proposed 20 years ago, would have been as respectable as the idea that our ancestors all landed in UFOs as part of a high-school science project on Alpha Centauri. If we find people here before 15,000 years ago, we can no longer assume a land-bridge route and must entertain the idea that the first Americans came by boat, probably cruising along the coasts,

and perhaps in quest of marine mammals. Instead of Siberians, they would have been more akin to the people we now find in various parts of East Asia and Polynesia or—and this is a deeply controversial idea—in Western Europe. One explosive theory suggests that the first Americans came from what is now Spain and France, bearing with them the kind of “Solutrean” culture which then prevailed in those regions. In this model, settlers would have coasted along the frozen shores of the North Atlantic via Iceland and Greenland, entering the New World through Labrador. Obviously, the people we call “Indians” appeared at some point, but either they were one group among many, or else they were late arrivals. Gradually, they displaced or (more likely) assimilated the older populations, whom we might call the true “Native” Americans.

Contributing to the demolition of the Clovis model is a small but quite devastating assemblage of anthropological evidence, in the form of ancient skeletons. The most celebrated is the fairly complete skeleton of a man found at Kennewick, Washington, in 1996 and dated to around 9,000 years before the present, but other important examples include the astonishing Spirit Cave mummy in Utah, which seems to have had brownish-red hair. None of the most ancient human remains in the Americas even vaguely fits a Siberian pattern, nor do any show a resemblance to American Indians. The oldest humans found in the Americas were characterized by long skulls and narrow faces.

At this point, we can see why the new discoveries are so troubling to American Indians, and hence to American theories of race. For Indians, the sense that they have always been here is fundamental to their whole belief system, and, often, religious values: White Americans pay homage to this idea when we use the term “Native Americans.” In some sense, Indians obviously have occupied the Americas far longer than the descendants of the British or Germans or Italians, but some Indian advocates take this “native” idea to unconscionable extremes. A whole school of “Native Creationism” holds that Indian creation myths are literally correct in asserting that particular tribes really did originate in the areas of North America which they claimed, and that scientific stories of geological change and human evolution are just another white man’s lie (though why

the white man would have invented ancestral origins in Africa remains unclear). The best-known advocate of this radical position is Vine DeLoria, Jr., author of a silly farrago of misinformation and special pleading entitled *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995). A milder form of the creationist idea holds that particular tribes have “always been” more or less where they first appear in the historical record, and that they have “always” venerated particular mountains, rivers, or natural features in that location. This autochthonous claim is even made by tribes that we know perfectly well moved to their present location relatively recently: The Navajo arrived in their southwestern homeland around the time that Columbus was setting sail, while the Lakota/Sioux probably had not even seen the Black Hills of Dakota before the 19th century. Nevertheless, modern activists hold that the respective sacred landscapes really have belonged to those tribes since time immemorial, and anyone who claims to the contrary is a damned Indian-hater. We can imagine the distress with which Indians regard claims that their ancestors were relatively late arrivals who undertook their own particular kind of ancient ethnic cleansing, and perhaps even displaced European predecessors.

Indian rhetoric that “we have always been here” has a strong appeal not just for the usual liberal constituency, suffused in *Dances With Wolves* sentimentality, but also for any impartial student of American history who can appreciate that Indians frequently have been treated very, very badly by white newcomers, sometimes to the point of diabolical savagery. A substantial feeling of white guilt is understandable, and it has found expression in federal laws designed to prevent a repetition of past atrocities. The problem is that some of these well-intentioned laws now create a critical conflict between the soundly attested findings of objective science and what we can only call “archaeological correctness.”

The most important measure in this regard is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990, which was designed to prevent the kind of ghoulish exploitation of Indian skeletons which had been commonplace in earlier decades. Under the law, Indian bones which had long been gathering dust in various museums were to be restored to their tribes of origin, and special obligations were laid upon ar-

chaeologists who might come upon such remains. Any “Native American cultural items” found on federal land were to be restored to “the lineal descendants of the Native American,” or, where that could not be determined, to the tribe on whose land these remains were found. In cases of controversy, a claim could be staked by “the Indian tribe that is recognized as aboriginally occupying the area in which the objects were discovered.” The law thus institutionalizes not just one but a whole series of scholarly orthodoxies which were already shaky in 1990 and have now all but disintegrated: namely, that any pre-Columbian material remains are by definition American Indian; and, moreover, that particular tribes are “aboriginal,” that they have been in that precise area since time immemorial (or, as some would say, since the Creation).

The effect on the study of ancient origins has been catastrophic. Indian activists can protest all they like at scholarly conferences proposing new theories of early American settlement, but with NAGPRA behind them, they can directly affect—or rather, sabotage—the course of scientific discovery. The effect of NAGPRA is evident from a series of cases in which scientists have been prevented from examining ancient bones which clearly manifest non-Indian features; in some cases, remains have been handed over to local tribes for clandestine reburial in places where they will never again be polluted by the hands of white scholars. Such concealment has been the fate of crucial remains from Minnesota, while the skeleton of the 11,000-year-old Buhl Woman from Idaho was promptly handed over to the Shoshone-Bannock tribe and is, in effect, lost forever to science. The law has forbidden proper investigation of the Spirit Cave mummy: The local Paiute tribe is demanding that body, too.

The present scholarly battleground is the Kennewick skeleton, about which much has already been learned, but the principal finding is that (like the Buhl and Spirit Cave skeletons) it represents a thoroughly non-Indian body type. Despite early reports that the skull was European in nature, the best evidence now suggests Polynesian parallels. Other obvious avenues of research suggest themselves, particularly DNA testing, but the time and opportunity for study is strictly limited because of federal law. The skeleton is pre-Columbian; therefore, it is Indian; therefore, it belongs to the tribe