

Copernican Iconography in Michelangelo's Last Judgment

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The idea that Copernicus's theory of heliocentricity underlies Michelangelo's depiction of Christ in the Last Judgment as an 'Apollonian' sun-god in the centre of a cosmic circular design was consistently rejected on the grounds that Michelangelo's fresco was finished in 1541, two years before the publication of Copernicus's *Revolutions*, in 1543. However, it can be demonstrated that the Sistine fresco was indeed influenced by the Copernican view of the universe, providing crucial evidence of papal support for Copernican heliocentricity in the 1530s.

In the traditional Judao-Christian iconography of the Last Judgment, the three parts of the universe (heaven, earth and hell) were depicted in a layered format based on the perception of the flat earth covered by the dome of heaven according to biblical cosmology. Michelangelo's fresco takes a revolutionary new approach. Christ is depicted like the sun and is positioned not at the top of a hierarchical scheme but in the centre of a dramatic circular, rotating design. The iconography can be traced to the common ground shared between the Catholic Reformation revival of the ancient analogy between Christ and the sun; the neoplatonic cult of sun-symbolism; and literary sources including Dante. More significantly, the influence of Copernican heliocentricity can be demonstrated by interest in papal circles at exactly the time of the fresco's commission in 1533. Copernican ideas were thus reflected in Michelangelo's fresco, with the knowledge, consent and approval of the two Popes concerned.

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