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# A New Proposal on the Chronological Order of the Moses and Christ Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel

Fumika Araki

## Introduction

In 1481, Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere (papacy: from 1471 to 1484) invited four Umbrian and Florentine painters, Pietro Perugino (c. 1450–1523), Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507), Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494) and Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445–1510), to Rome to decorate the entire walls of the pontifical chapel taking his name, the Sistine Chapel [Fig. 1]. These painters were considered to be the most skillful artists at that time and all of them had already managed their own workshop.

The walls of the chapel were horizontally divided into three registers [Fig. 2]. On the upper level, a series of figures of the early popes standing in niches was painted. On the middle level, parts of the rectangular compartments were similarly divided (c. 3.40 × 5.40m) for the sixteen stories from the life of Moses and that of Christ (eight for each). On the lower level, the fictive curtains were painted under the narratives. In addition, Perugino frescoed *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* on the altar wall as the altarpiece since the chapel was dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption. In the sixteenth century, the altarpiece and the first narratives from the life of Moses and that of Christ (*Finding of Moses* and *Nativity*) painted on the altar wall were replaced with Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Then, the last narratives of



Fig. 1. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 2. Sistine Chapel, Left Wall, Vatican City.

the Moses and Christ cycles on the entrance wall (*Disputation over Moses' Body and Resurrection*) were repainted from 1571 to 1572. As a result, the twelve original narratives on the side walls still exist today.

The purpose of this article is to propose a new theory on the chronological order of the two cycles, while paying special attention to the stylistic matters of the frescoes on the side walls. Concerning the frescoes from the life of Moses and that of Christ in the Sistine Chapel<sup>(1)</sup>, the previous art historians have often discussed the stylistic issues in the monographies dedicated to each painter, taking up only the frescoes depicted by a relative workshop. It has been also pointed out that the Moses and Christ cycles typologically complement each other and the imagery of

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For the frescoes of the fifteenth century in the Sistine Chapel, see E. Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, I Band, München 1901; A. Groner, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Sixtinischen Wandfresken," in *Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst*, XIX 1906, pp. 163–170, 191–202 and 227–236; L. D. Ettliger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford 1965; J. Shearman, "La costruzione della Cappella e la prima decorazione al tempo di Sisto IV," in *La Cappella Sistina*, Marcella Boroli, Nihon Terebi, Novara 1986, pp. 22–87; C. Acidini Luchinat, "Pittori fiorentini al servizio dei papi," in *Maestri e botteghe: Pittura a Firenze alla fine del Quattrocento*, Giovanna Lazzi, Milano 1992, pp. 271–281; F. Buranelli, A. Duston, J. M. Mejía et al., *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel: Recent Restorations of the Vatican Museums*, vol.4, Vatican City State 2003; H. Pfeiffer, S. J., *The Sistine Chapel. A New Vision*, S. Lindberg (tr.), New York - London 2007; 上村清雄ほか『フレスコ画の身体学: システイーナ礼拝堂の表象空間』ありな書房, 2012年; 越川倫明ほか『システイーナ礼拝堂を読む』河出書房新社, 2013年. For the art and lives of the four painters invited to Rome by the pope in 1481, see A. R. Blumenthal, P. Nuttall, D. George and W. Harriet, *Cosimo Rosselli: Painter of the Sistine Chapel*, Florida Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College 2001; E. Gabrielli, *Cosimo Rosselli: catalogo ragionato*, Torino – London – Venezia - New York 2007; A. Cecchi, *Sandro Botticelli*, Milano 2005; 高階秀爾, 鈴木杜幾子編『ボッティチェッリ全作品集』中央公論出版, 2005年; E. Fahy, *Some followers of Domenico Ghirlandaio*, New York

the cycle is iconographically linked to the primacy of papal power and Pope Sixtus' personality and ambitions. Scholars tended to focus on the collaborative aspects of the fresco production by revealing that the participating artists shared certain styles, such as the heights of the horizon, size of the figures, and choice of colors in order to create the harmonious appearance of the mural paintings<sup>(2)</sup>. However, the chronological order of the fresco production has received little attention, even though it seems to be an essential issue for the understanding of the fifteenth century frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.

### 1. Documental evidences

Previous scholars have often paid attention to two primary documents related to the fifteenth century frescoes in the pontifical chapel in order to interpret the chronological order of the production of the Moses and Christ frescoes. Namely, the contract for ten narratives dated October 27, 1481 (Oblig et Solut. 79 A, fols. 15v–16r.) and the memorandum of the payment of January 17, 1482 (Oblig et Solut. 79 A, fols. 16v–17r) conserved in the Vatican Archives<sup>(3)</sup>.

The first document informs us that on the day, the four artists, Perugino, Rosselli, Ghirlandaio and Botticelli met in a room at the Vatican Palace and contracted with a supervisor nominated by the pope for this art project, Giovanni de Dolci (c. 1435?–c. 1485), to paint ten stories from the Old and New Testaments and

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- London 1976; R. G. Kecks, *Ghirlandaio: catalogo completo*, Firenze 1995; J. K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*, New Haven – London 2000; J. A. Becherer et al., *Pietro Perugino: Master of the Italian Renaissance*, New York 1997; V. Garibaldi, *Perugino: catalogo completo*, Firenze 1999; V. Garibaldi e F. F. Macini, *Perugino: il divin pittore*, Milano 2004.

(2) For the collaboration by the contracted painters in the Sistine Chapel, the article by A. Nesselrath is essential. Idem, “The Painters of Lorenzo the Magnificent in the Chapel of Pope Sixtus IV in Rome,” in F. Buranelli et al., *op. cit.*, pp.39–75, in part. 48–51.

(3) L. D. Ettlinger, *op. cit.*, pp.120–123; D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance*, London 1970, pp. 20–22; A. Nesselrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71.

curtains in the lower part (*decem istorias testamenti antiqui et novi cum cortinis inferi[us]*). It states that the artists should start from the altar side toward the entrance (*a capite altaris inferius*). Also, the work should be carried out following the frescoes (these are not specified) which have already been started (*prout inceptum est*). The work stipulated in the contract was to be finished by March 1482, otherwise the artists would be charged with 50 ducats each as a penalty (*depingere et finire hinc ad quintamdecimam diem mesis marcii proxime futuri... sub pena quinquaginta ducatorum auri de camera pro quolibet eorundem contrafaciente*). Though there were only less than 6 months left before the deadline, the contracted painters accepted all of the conditions including the date and penalty. Furthermore, Giovanni de Dolci, who was a carpenter and architect, should have had knowledge about the method of frescoes to a certain level. Considering this, it can be assumed that the execution of frescoes had already been under way, to some extent, at the period that this document was written<sup>(4)</sup>.

The second document also indicates the presence of the same four artists in a chamber of Cardinal Domenico della Rovere (c. 1442–1501) in the Vatican Palace on January 17, 1482. It shows that a group consisting of some clergymen, two painters from northern Italy and Giovanni de Dolci made a judgment on four

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(4) For Giovanni de Dolci, see *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma 1991, vol. 40, pp. 425–427. He moved from Florence to Rome probably in the papacy of Nicholas V. His name started to appear in the papal account book around 1460. At the beginning, he was a carpenter (*lignarius*) who supplied doors or inlaid chests to the Vatican Palace. From the end of the 1460s, he began to show his talent as an architect, taking part in construction in many places in Rome including the Vatican City. He was appointed as supervisor for papal architectures in 1471, the year that Sixtus IV ascended to the throne. Giovanni de Dolci could be one of the pope's favorite architects. It is considered that he could be a chief to rebuild the old Sistine Chapel preparing for the mural paintings of fifteenth century promoted by Sixtus IV. For the papal expenditure from fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see E. Müntz, *Les arts à la cour des papes pendant le XV<sup>e</sup> et le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: recueil de documents inédits tirés des archives et des bibliothèques romaines*, Hildesheim – Olms, 1983.

unspecified frescoes and they decided that each painter was to be paid 250 ducats for one bay made up of one narrative with two papal figures above and a curtain below.

## **2. Previous studies on the chronological order of the Moses and Christ frescoes: a contradiction of L. D. Ettlinger's theory (1965)**

E. Steinmann suggests that, in 1901, that Perugino had completed the altar wall (*Finding of Moses, Nativity and Assumption of the Virgin Mary*) before other artists arrived in Rome<sup>(5)</sup>. I also believe it to be true, taking the following points into consideration. First, Perugino had been present in Rome before he met the other three painters in the Vatican Palace in 1481 because he had been invited to Rome for the mural decoration of Sixtus' burial chapel in 1478 that the pope owned in the Old Saint Peter's. At that time, the Sistine Chapel reconstruction was in progress, so he might have taken some occasions to talk with Giovanni de Dolci (possibly the person responsible for the rebuilding) about a new decoration for the chapel. Secondly, Perugino seemed to leave Rome around the same time with the other painters, probably in summer of 1482, although the largest number of frescoes (five in sixteen stories from the life of Moses and that of Christ) besides the altarpiece was assigned to him<sup>(6)</sup>. Furthermore, he painted two subjects of great importance, *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* as the altarpiece and *Delivery of the Keys*, which emphasizes the primacy of the first pope and the papal authority.

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(5) E. Steinmann, *op. cit.*, p. 187 ff. He assumes that three stories, *Crossing of the Red Sea, Punishment of Korah* and *Delivery of the Keys*, should have been painted after the latter half of 1482 because he finds the allusion of contemporary events in these biblical scenes, respectively the battle of Campo Morto (21 August, 1482), the antipapal agitation of Andreas Zamometic (from the summer to December of 1482) and a portrait of Alfonso of Calabria who came to Rome at the end of 1482.

(6) For a convincing proposal on the completion of the art project, see J. Monfasani, "A Description of the Sistine Chapel under Pope IV," in *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 4 (no. 7) 1983, pp. 9–18.

Actually, Perugino received a commission for the fresco decoration of the Sala dei Gigli in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, together with some painters with whom he had collaborated in the Sistine Chapel on October 5 of the same year. It is likely that Perugino would assume a similar role to Ghirlandaio in the execution of frescoes for the Sala dei Gigli that began around the summer of 1482<sup>(7)</sup>. The art project was surely organized with a clear regard for that of the Sistine Chapel. Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449–1492), one of Sixtus’ rivals, was pulling the strings behind this project<sup>(8)</sup> and, furthermore, it was planned to be a collaborative and competitive theater, as in the case of the Sistine Chapel, by involving many painters who had just collaborated in the pontifical chapel, including Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Perugino and Biagio d’Antonio Tucci (of whom we will see more in the next chapter), even if the collaboration by these artists was never realized in Florence. In this case, first, Ghirlandaio began to work and received a part of his salary for the fresco on the east wall of the hall on September 17 and then the contract with other painters was officially drawn up for the remaining walls on October 5. The Ghirlandaio’s fresco must have become a meritorious work to be followed in subsequent stages and likely made the collaboration with individual painters smoother. I assume that a certain chief who defined a rough direction of fresco productions under the collaboration between multiple workshops would be essential at that time in order to keep its harmonious appearance, to progress the work effectively and to save time<sup>(9)</sup>. In fact, Vasari suggests the existence of a *capo*

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(7) For the fresco decoration of the Sala dei Gigli, see M. Hegarty, “Laurentian Patronage in the Palazzo Vecchio: The Frescoes of the Sala dei Gigli,” in *Art Bulletin*, vol. 78 no. 2, 1996, pp. 264–285.

(8) The involvement of Lorenzo with commissions for the fresco decoration of the Sala dei Gigli is the main topic of the Hegarty’s article (see note 7). Goffen points out an implicit rivalry of Lorenzo toward Sixtus IV in the art project for the Medici villa at Spedaletto (c. 1490) employing three painters who worked together in the Sistine Chapel. R. Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian*, New Haven – London 2002, p. 22.



on the production of the fifteenth century frescoes in the Sistine Chapel although he gives this important role to the Florentine painter, Botticelli, not to Perugino from Umbria<sup>(9)</sup>.

Furthermore, Steinmann considers that the ten frescoes assigned to the contracted artists in the first document were planned to be painted afterwards. In other words, the unspecified four frescoes on the side and entrance walls also had been completed by the contract that was drawn up. Steinmann's research was first published more than a century before and has remained widely influential.

In 1965, L. D. Ettlinger basically follows Steinmann's view and divides the production process of the mural decoration into three phases<sup>(11)</sup>. Ettlinger's opinion is still widely accepted. For the first phase, the scholar agrees with Steinmann's opinion that the altar wall and four frescoes were finished by October 1481. While Steinmann did not identify which frescoes he was referring to, Ettlinger ingeniously asserts that they were the first four frescoes of the Christ cycle close to the altar wall (*Baptism of Christ, Trials of Christ, Vocation of the Apostles and Sermon on the Mount* [Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6]), among the fourteen frescoes on the side and entrance walls as follows. First, since the contract of October 1481 indicates that the artists should start from the altar side toward the entrance, Ettlinger assumes that these four frescoes should have been the first four frescoes of the Moses cycle or those of the Christ cycle on the side walls close to the altar. This is because the execution of frescoes is generally carried side by side, as he points out. Consequently, just the

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(9) Goffen mentions that the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Sforza, asked three painters decorating San Giacomo in Pavia together to choose one of them as a supervisory position to keep the harmonious appearance of frescoes (R. Goffen, *op. cit.*, p. 10).

(10) "Laonde, (Botticelli) acquistato fra' molti concorrenti, che seco lavorarono e Fiorentini e di altre città, fama e nome maggiore" (G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori scritte da Giorgio Vasari pittore Aretino con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanese*, Tomo III, Bologna 1973, p. 317, In parentheses compensated by this author).

(11) Ettlinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–22.

first four frescoes from the altar side were assigned to four painters in the scheme of the attributions according to Ettlenger's view [Scheme 1]. In my opinion, the fact that the stylistic unity among these four frescoes from the Christ life shows the highest balance reinforces his suggestion. At the beginning of the collaboration, four painters might have worked together paying close attention to a variety of criteria to be followed to moderate the stylistic differences by the individual painters. In fact, two of three frescoes depicted by Botticelli, *Trials of Moses* and *Punishment of Korah* dramatically break the common denominators<sup>(12)</sup>. In addition, it is likely that the series of popes' portraits should have been completed by October 27 for the following reasons. The first document mentioned just ten frescoes and the curtains below, and the fresco decoration is usually executed from the top to the bottom. For the second phase of the work, Ettlenger states that, among the remaining ten frescoes, four stories of Moses life situated close to the altar wall were painted while giving weight to the phrase in the contract, *a capite altaris inferius*. And in the third phase, the production of the remaining six frescoes followed [scheme 1]. It is generally agreed that Signorelli joined the team in the last stage of the collaborating system, or he arrived after the contracted painters have left Rome to paint the last two frescoes from the Moses cycle.

Recently, in 2003, Nesslerath expressed an opposing view to Perugino's preceding start. Nesslerath states that the contracted painters began to work all together soon before the contract was made in 1481. Then, he interprets '*a capite altaris inferius*' as 'over the altar', thus, assuming that the ten frescoes referred in the contract were two on the altar wall and eight on the side walls (four in each) close to the altar. According to Nesslerath, these frescoes were painted at the same

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(12) I argue how Botticelli tried to differentiate himself from the other artists under the collaborative and competitive condition of the art project in the Sistine Chapel in the first chapter of my book. F. Araki, *Le cappelle Bufalini e Carafa: Dall'odio dottorinale e culturale tra domenicani e francescani alle rivalità artistiche*, Roma 2019 (in printing).



Fig. 3. Pietro Perugino, *Baptism of Christ*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 4. Sandro Botticelli, *Trials of Christ*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 5. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Vocation of the Apostles*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 6. Cosimo Rosselli, *Sermon on the Mount*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

[scheme 1]

The chronological order of the Sistine frescoes and its assignment to the related painters according to Ettlinger's view

	The Moses cycle	The Christ cycle
The altar wall	<i>Finding of Moses</i> Perugino	<i>Nativity</i> Perugino
The side walls	<i>Circumcision of Moses' Son</i> Perugino	<i>Baptism of Christ</i> Perugino
	<i>Trials of Moses</i> Botticelli	<i>Trials of Christ</i> Botticelli
	<i>Crossing of the Red Sea</i> Rosselli	<i>Vocation of the Apostles</i> Ghirlandaio
	<i>Descent from Mount Sinai</i> Rosselli	<i>Sermon on the Mount</i> Rosselli
	<i>Punishment of Korah</i> Botticelli	<i>Delivery of the Keys</i> Perugino
	<i>Testament and Death of Moses</i> Signorelli	<i>Last Supper</i> Rosselli
The entrance wall	<i>Disputation over Moses' Body</i> Signorelli	<i>Resurrection</i> Ghirlandaio

/ / / the first phase  
 ■■■■ the second phase  
 ××× the third phase

time until the second document was drawn up on January 17, 1482. He assumes that Perugino took charge of four out of the ten frescoes since his workshop was much bigger than others'. Then the remaining six frescoes were completed by April or May of that year. However, if Perugino had managed such a big workshop as Nesslerath supposes, Perugino's workshop could have also painted the last two narratives from Moses' life that, in fact, were totally allocated to Signorelli<sup>(13)</sup>.

Here, if we pay attention to Ghirlandaio's presence, we notice that there is a contradiction in Ettlinger's widely accepted theory. According to his view, no trace of Ghirlandaio's hand can be found in the first four pieces of the Moses cycle that

(13) For other previous studies on the chronology of the Moses and Christ frescoes, see A. Groner, *op. cit.*, pp. 163–170; 松浦弘明『イタリア・ルネサンス美術館』東京堂出版, 2011年, pp. 280–291. In 1906, Groner follows Steinmann's view that Perugino began to work ahead of the other artists. Unlike Steinmann, he considers that the side and entrance walls were untouched and just ten frescoes among the remaining fourteen

were depicted soon after the first four pieces of the Christ cycle [scheme 1]. It follows from Ettlenger's proposal that Ghirlandaio would have left Rome shortly after signing the contract for ten frescoes. In this period, however, Ghirlandaio must have been in Rome since the documents of October 1481 and January 1482 state the presence of four artists in Rome. Furthermore, the attendance lists of the Compagnia di San Paolo in Florence that the painter regularly attended, show his absence from the brotherhood for four months from the beginning of September 1481 to January 1482<sup>(14)</sup>. The key to resolve the contradiction of Ettlenger's theory seems to exist in the argument on the attribution of the four Moses frescoes situated near the altar wall. In fact, the observations of the fifteenth century frescoes, restored and unveiled in 2000, will lead us to the fact that at least three of them, *Circumcision of Moses' Son*, *Crossing of the Red Sea* and *Descent from Mount Sinai* [Figs. 7, 8, 9] were not executed by the contracted masters' direct hands. Through the stylistic analysis of the Sistine frescoes, I would like to present a new theory on the chronological order of the Moses and Christ cycles.

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stories were assigned to four painters when the contract of October 27, 1481 was drawn up. In 2011, Matsuura agrees with the view of Steinmann and Ettlenger in the respect that the altar wall and four frescoes had been finished by October 1481. The scholar, on the contrary, identifies these four frescoes as those from Moses' life close to the altar wall. Since he attributes *Crossing of the Red Sea* to Ghirlandaio's hand, the four contracted artists were all present side by side for all four frescoes of the Christ and Moses cycles on the opposite side walls near the altar wall. Furthermore, he pays attention to the fact that the stylistic unity among the four Christ frescoes is more balanced than that from Moses' life and then he suggests that the former should have unpreceded the latter. That is because, according to him, the collaborating system for creating the stylistic harmony among the scenes by the contracted artists should have been established step by step. However, his interpretation seems to contain a contradiction, thinking that the last narrative depicted by Botticelli, *Punishment of Korah*, breaks the unity to the highest degree.

(14) Cadogan, *op. cit.*, doc.7, pp. 337–340; 米田潔弘「ギルランダイオとロレンツォ・デ・メデイチー画家、パトロン、兄弟会—」『桐朋学園大学紀要』42 (2016), pp. 131–157.





Fig. 7. Pietro Perugino, *Circumcision of Moses' Son*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 8. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Crossing of the Red Sea*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 9. Cosimo Rosselli, *Descent from Mount Sinai*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

### 3. The problem of the attributions for the four frescoes from the life of Moses

#### 3–1. Circumcision of Moses' Son

This story from the early life of Moses is frescoed in the bay nearest to the altar wall [Fig. 7]. In the Sistine Chapel, the narratives from the life of Moses and that of Christ are, in principle, arranged from the altar wall to the entrance wall in the order where the Old and New Testaments narrate. The fresco of *Circumcision of Moses' Son* (Book of Exodus, 4:24–26) is situated here, breaking the correct arrangement of the story which follows the story of the Trials of Moses (Book of Exodus, 2–4). But this narrative is depicted in the adjacent bay of *Circumcision* on the left-hand side. This is because it is typologically complementary to *Baptism of Christ* depicted on the bay straight in front of *Circumcision* on the opposite wall<sup>(15)</sup>.

(15) The *tituli* inscribed on the rectangle compartments for the narratives show clearly that





Fig. 10. Pietro Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

As Garibaldi has repeatedly asserted, *Circumcision of Moses' Son* appears to have strong evidence of being painted by Perugino's assistants, Pinturicchio, Piermatteo d'Amelia and il Pastura, while *Delivery of the Keys* [Fig. 10] was totally executed by Perugino himself<sup>(16)</sup> and it is considered as one of his masterpieces. For now, it would be sufficient to just pay attention to the figure of Moses with a green garment over yellow clothes who is watching over his son's circumcision in the right foreground [Fig. 11]. His head is proportionally distorted and his body is not monumental at all when compared with the magnificent figures arrayed in the

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the frescoes facing each other are one pair: OBSERVATIO ANTIQUE REGENERATIONIS A MOISE PER CIRCONCISIONEM (over *Circumcision of Moses' Son*), INSTITUTIO NOVAE REGENERATIONIS A CHRISTO IN BAPTISMO (*Baptism of Christ*). These inscriptions were found during the restoration that started at the end of 1965, see Deoclecio R. de Campos, "I titoli degli affreschi del Quattrocento nella Cappella Sistina," in *Roma: Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Rendiconti*, 42 1970, pp. 299–314.

(16) V. Garibaldi, *Perugino: catalogo complete*, Firenze 1999, p. 103; V. Garibaldi e F. F. Mancini, *Perugino: il divin pittore*, Milano 2004, pp. 73–77.



Fig. 11. Pietro Perugino, *Circumcision of Moses' Son* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 12. Pietro Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

foreground of *Delivery of the Keys* [Fig. 12]. As a consequence, Moses seems not to be a protagonist, but rather playing a secondary role in this narrative. In general, a master depicts main characters in the execution of fresco decorations. However, it is obvious at a glance that the figure of Moses was assigned to one of Perugino's assistants. In addition, it is worth noticing the woman who carries a case on her head in the left foreground of the Moses story. Perugino's delicate brush strokes and



Fig. 13. Pietro Perugino, *Circumcision of Moses' Son* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 14. Pietro Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

gentle shading in *Delivery* apparently cannot be identified here, although the same cartoon for the figure of Christ passing the keys to Saint Peter was reused for the woman [Figs. 13, 14].

### 3–2. Crossing of the Red Sea

This story is situated in the middle register of the third bay on the left wall [Fig. 8]. Concerning the attribution for the fresco, Giorgio Vasari (1567) described in the chapter dedicated to Cosimo Rosselli that it was executed by Rosselli himself<sup>(17)</sup>. Vasari's view has been highly influential to later scholars, while some attributed it to Piero di Cosimo<sup>(18)</sup> or Ghirlandaio<sup>(19)</sup>. On the other hand, Berenson's new attribution to Utili, proposed in 1932, has been overlooked for a long time<sup>(20)</sup>.

(17) “vi dipinse di sua mano tre storie, nelle quali fece la sommersione di Faraone nel mar rosso, la predica di Cristo ai popoli lungo il mare di Tiberiade, e l'ultima cena degli Apostoli col Salvatore” (G. Vasari, *op. cit.*, p. 188).

(18) Steinmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 432 – 434.

(19) Groner, *op. cit.*, pp. 230–231; Shearman, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 46 and 58; Sylvia Ferino Pagden, “Perugino al servizio dei Della Rovere: Sisto IV e il Cardinale Giuliano,” in *Sisto IV e Giulio II: Mecenate e promotori di cultura*, Savona 1989, p. 62.



Fig. 15. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Engagement of Jason and Medea*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

The artist is now identified as the Florentine painter Biagio d'Antonio Tucci (c. 1445 – c. 1510). Berenson's convincing view came to be supported afterward by Passavant (1966), Fahy (1976), Acidini (1992) and Bartoli (1999), and recently consolidated by Nesselrath (2003) by pointing out the similarity of the figures in *Crossing of the Red Sea* and Biagio's *Engagement of Jason and Medea* now in Paris [Fig. 15]<sup>20</sup>.

I also agree with the attribution to Biagio. The figure of the woman carrying a sack on her head in the left foreground of *Crossing of the Red Sea* shows a strong resemblance to Medea in their poses, proportions, clothes and draperies [Figs. 16, 17]. The combination of a woman with a veil in three-quarter face and another in profile next to her in *Crossing* reappears in a group of ladies in *Engagement* [Figs.

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<sup>20</sup> B. Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: a List of the Principal Artists and Their Works, with an Index of Places, Florentine School*, London 1963, p. 211.

<sup>21</sup> G. Passavant, "Review of Eitlinger 1965," in *Kunstchronik*, XIX 1966, pp. 214–231; E. Fahy, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 209; R. Bartoli, *Biagio d'Antonio*, Milano, 1999, pp. 64–68; A. Nesselrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–69.



Fig. 17. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Engagement of Jason and Medea* (detail), Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Fig. 16. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Crossing of the Red Sea* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 18. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Engagement of Jason and Medea* (detail), Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.





Fig. 19. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Crossing of the Red Sea* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 20. Biagio d'Antonio Tucci, *Ascent to Golgotha* (detail), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

16, 18]<sup>22</sup>. In addition, the face of a man with a yellow turban in *Crossing* strikingly resembles that of a woman next to the Virgin Mary in *Ascent to Golgotha* by Biagio, now in the Louvre, not only in the shape of the eyelid, the bridge of the nose and the mouth turned down at the corners but the use of shading [Figs. 19, 20]. Moreover, according to Nesselrath, the spolvero method is heavily used for *Crossing of the Red Sea*, while a few traces of cartoon transfer can be found in the frescoes of Rosselli and Ghirlandaio<sup>23</sup>.

Biagio shows his stylistic characteristics influenced by Cosimo Rosselli and then also by Andrea del Verrocchio (c. 1435–1488) early in his career<sup>24</sup>. The echoes from Domenico Ghirlandaio can be identified in his works after joining the fresco production in the Sistine Chapel<sup>25</sup>. Biagio might have been invited to Rome due to

<sup>22</sup> Bartoli points out the close resemblance in faces between the woman with a veil and a portrait depicted by Biagio now conserved in the National Gallery of Washington (R. Bartoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–81, in part. p. 68).

<sup>23</sup> A. Nesselrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–55.

<sup>24</sup> *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, cit. 1968, vol. 10, pp. 3–5. Bartoli refers to the influence of Rosselli and Verrocchio on the missing *Virgin and Child with Two Angels*, once in Tokyo and considered as Biagio's work between the 1460s and 1470s (R. Bartoli, *op. cit.*, p. 182).

<sup>25</sup> R. Bartoli, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–86.



Fig. 21. Cosimo Rosselli, *Descent from Mount Sinai* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 22. Cosimo Rosselli, *Descent from Mount Sinai* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

his old acquaintance with Rosselli and he might have executed some frescoes supervised by Rosselli and Ghirlandaio. In fact, it is generally agreed that he painted the three episodes from the story of Passion in the foreground of *Last Supper* attributed to Rosselli<sup>(26)</sup>. In addition, in my view, the same cartoon for the figure of Christ calling Saint Peter and Saint Andrew in *Vocation of the Apostles* is reused for Moses of *Crossing of the Red Sea*.

### 3–3. Descent from Mount Sinai

The story is situated in the middle register of the fourth bay from the altar wall [Fig. 9]. This fresco is traditionally attributed to one of the four contracted painters, Cosimo Rosselli. However, in my opinion, this fresco is apparently executed not only by the master's hand, but mainly by his respective pupils, similar to the case

<sup>(26)</sup> Idem, *op. cit.*, pp. 64–81.



Fig. 23. Cosimo Rosselli, *Last Supper* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.



Fig. 24. Cosimo Rosselli, *Sermon on the Mount* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

of *Circumcision of Moses' Son* and of *Crossing of the Red Sea* that I have argued in the previous section. The proportions and the aspect of figures in the foreground of *Descent from Mount Sinai* very much differ from those of preaching Christ in *Sermon on the Mount* and those of the men standing at the opposite side of *Last Supper*. Their bodies seem to be elongated due to their extremely small heads [Figs. 21, 22, 23]. Their characteristic aspects are eyes with the whites showing beneath the iris and either thick and muscular necks or with sagging wrinkles that connect oddly small heads and somehow awkward bodies. It is true that figures depicted by Rosselli assume often similar features in their necks<sup>(27)</sup>. However, the main

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(27) For example, *Virgin and Child with Two Angels* in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [accession number: 32.100.84].



characters in *Sermon on the Mount* and *Last Supper* have necks with wrinkles that are naturally connected with heads and bodies by the usage of gentle shading. The similar physiognomy of the figures appearing in the foreground of *Descent* can be identified in the crowd of *Sermon* [Fig. 24]. This could be proof that one of Rosselli's assistants, who collaborated with his master in the execution of *Sermon*, played the main role in *Descent*.

These observations made above suggests that three of the four frescoes nearest to the altar on the left wall, *Circumcision of Moses' Son*, *Crossing of the Red Sea* and *Descent from Mount Sinai*, were all executed mainly by the assistants of the three contracted masters. If that is the case, what would Perugino, Ghirlandaio and Rosselli have been doing, while their pupils were painting these Moses' frescoes? I would like to propose that, after having finished the first four stories, Perugino, Ghirlandaio and Rosselli continued to execute the Christ cycle and, at the same time, their assistants and Botticelli started to decorate the other side wall from the altar side by the narratives from the life of Moses, in order to complete the rush assignment by March 1482, the deadline that they agreed in the contract of October 1481 [scheme 2]. On the contrary to Ettlenger's view, Ghirlandaio did not leave Rome after the contract was drawn up. The painter went to execute the last narrative, *Resurrection*, on the entrance wall as Vasari described<sup>28</sup>.

















It is not hard to anticipate that the Christ cycle was more important than the Moses cycle for the circle in the Vatican Palace. Considering that the last two frescoes of the Moses cycle were totally assigned to Luca Signorelli, it is evident that both the patron and the artists had the intention of finishing the Christ cycle before the Moses cycle. For another thing, the Christ cycle should have been




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<sup>28</sup> “Essendo poi chiamato a Roma da papa Sisto IV a dipignere, con altri maestri, la sua cappella; vi dipinse quando Cristo chiama a sè dale reti Pietro ed Andrea, e la Ressurrezione di esso Gesù Cristo...” (G. Vasari, *op. cit.*, p. 250).

[scheme 2]

The chronological order of the Sistine frescoes and its assignment to the related painters according to this author's view

	The Moses cycle	The Christ cycle
The altar wall	 <i>Finding of Moses</i> Perugino	 <i>Nativity</i> Perugino
The side walls	 <i>Circumcision of Moses' Son</i> Perugino (mainly by Perugino's assistants)	 <i>Baptism of Christ</i> Perugino
	 <i>Trials of Moses</i> Botticelli	 <i>Trials of Christ</i> Botticelli
	 <i>Crossing of the Red Sea</i> Biagio d'Antonio	 <i>Vocation of the Apostles</i> Ghirlandaio
	 <i>Descent from Mount Sinai</i> Rosselli (mainly by Rosselli's assistants)	 <i>Sermon on the Mount</i> Rosselli
	 <i>Punishment of Korah</i> Botticelli	 <i>Delivery of the Keys</i> Perugino
	 <i>Testament and Death of Moses</i> Signorelli	 <i>Last Supper</i> Rosselli
The entrance wall	 <i>Disputation over Moses' Body</i> Signorelli	 <i>Resurrection</i> Ghirlandaio

 the first phase  
 the second phase  
 the third phase

completed more beautifully by the masters' own hands. The emphasis on the Christ cycle can be confirmed also from the arrangement of narratives. As already mentioned above, the disposition of narratives from the life of Moses partly reverses in order to correspond typologically with the Christ cycle on the opposite wall.

### Conclusion

This article aims to propose a new theory on the chronological order of frescoes from the life of Moses and that of Christ in the Sistine Chapel. The recent restoration finished in 2000 permitted this study to advance. Namely, it allowed the synthesis of the observation on the reborn frescoes and the previous studies on the stylistic issue that have been performed separately in monographies of the respective artists. The presence of the masters' hands would have shown equally in

each fresco if the masters had executed the frescoes according to the chronological order that Ettliger proposed. However, this article revealed the fact that three frescoes of four from the Moses cycle nearest to the altar wall were mainly executed by the contracted painters' assistants. This means that masters, Perugino, Ghirlandaio and Rosselli, continued the Christ cycle that was emphasized more in the Roman Curia after completing the four frescoes from the life of Christ close to the altar wall while their assistants were undertaking the Moses cycle. This study is essential for a deeper understanding of the fifteenth century frescoes in the Sistine Chapel and it will open the path to reveal the thought process of the painters who were collaborators and, at the same time, rivals in the pontificate chapel from 1481 and 1482. This matter will be discussed at some other time<sup>(29)</sup>.

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(29) See note 12.