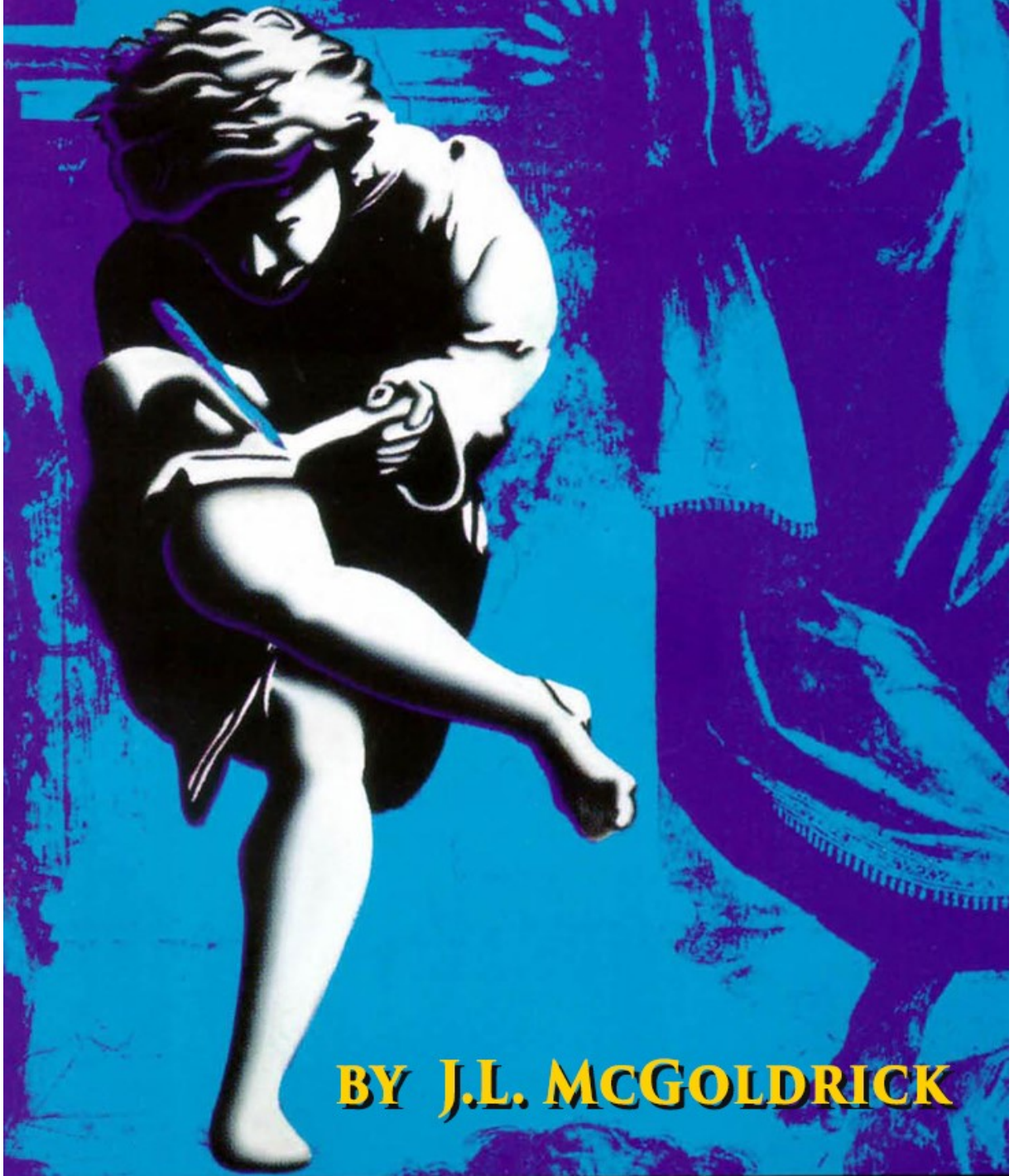


# THE MYSTERY OF MICHELANGELO



# **The Mystery of Michelangelo**

**By J. L. McGoldrick III**

Michelangelo, his work is God-like by any other name, or is it?

This story is taken from the memoirs of a peasant who witnessed the creation of one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Below the Church of Saint Peter in Chains hides a secret room used by priests during the Roman Empire. It held fugitives and religious refugees. The only entrance to the room was through a hole located under the third confessional along the north wall.

Only two people knew about the hideaway: a peasant boy named Fredo, and the priest Aristo, who allowed the young man to stay there. The boy's only payment for the shelter was to learn and practice reading and writing. Aristo often stated, "The road to enlightenment begins with observation."

Aristo asked Fredo to begin a diary. In the diary, he could write anything he wanted. Aristo never again asked to see it. The first entry in Fredo's memoir was on May 10, 1507, when this story begins.

Fredo would normally sit below the seats of the confessionals and listen to the private sins confessed. It was exciting hearing their tales. One night was strangely silent.

Fredo was all alone when two men suddenly came through a side door. He recognized Pope Julius II, a tiny, frail man who looked as though it took all his strength to hold up the vested garments he wore. They were made of heavy red cloth, trimmed in gold, with silk cuffs and bright black leather shoes. The other man was dressed poorly, yet Fredo noticed he was treated with reverence by Pope Julius.

He heard them arguing. As they got closer, Fredo began to write down their conversation. The two men argued for quite some time about painting the ceiling. Earlier in the year, the ceiling had received severe storm damage. The strange-looking man kept saying that making the ceiling into a fresco could take a lifetime, and that he would not do it.

Finally, Pope Julius spoke with authority.

“You will paint a fresco on the ceiling of God’s Church, or you will spend the rest of your life behind bars.”

With that, the two men disappeared out the large front doors.

Fredo later learned that the stranger who received such respect was Michelangelo. Fredo was excited; this meant there would be no more lonely nights for him.

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Michelangelo hired three men to help with the construction of the scaffolding and the painting. The work would be done at night so the Church could remain open during the day.

On the first night, Fredo placed himself as close to the hole as possible. He could not only hear but also see the work being done without being detected by the workers.

Fredo noticed a small boy sitting in the back corner of the Church. He was dressed like a poor child; the clothes appeared clean but slightly tattered. Soon Fredo’s attention was drawn from the child to the top of the scaffolding, where Michelangelo, Giorgio, Raphael, and Vincent were arguing. The three helpers were unhappy with what Michelangelo wanted to paint on the ceiling.

“No one wants to see sinful gestures when they come to pray,” Giorgio said.

“Then you paint what you want over there,” Michelangelo replied, pointing to the farthest corner, “and I’ll paint what I want over here!”

By daybreak, all four men were still in disagreement. Finally, in total frustration, the four men climbed down the scaffolding and stormed outside.

Fredo noticed the child follow the men out without making a sound.

The following evening began just as the previous night had ended. The child sat in the far corner, concealed, and Fredo noticed he was wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

Still furious with his helpers, Michelangelo caught a glimpse of the child in the corner. He went over and sat down.

“Which one of my helpers is your father?” he asked.

“None, sir,” replied the child. “I moved to Italy recently with my mother. She works at night and told me to wait for her here where it is warm. Is it okay?”

“Yes, that is fine,” replied Michelangelo.

“What is your name, and how old are you?” he asked.

The child replied with warm confidence, “My name is Salvatore, sir. I am seven years old.”

“Salvatore, what do you think of my ideas?” asked Michelangelo.

“Sir, I do not know your ideas, but I believe you should paint what you feel, without all the yelling.”

Michelangelo laughed. “If only I could find someone to hold my paint palette, I would do just that!” he replied, still laughing and holding his stomach.

As the night wore on and slowly gave way to dawn, the child and the artist discussed all sorts of topics. Both Fredo and Michelangelo thought Salvatore seemed quite wise for a child of his age.

With a smile as bright as the rising sun, the child told Michelangelo, “I would be proud to hold your paints for you.”

Michelangelo said, “Good, then I will see you here at sunset!”

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When the sun began to set the next day, Michelangelo saw the child already seated on the entry steps and said, “Good evening, Salvatore. The early bird gets the worm!”—a reference that made the young boy smile from ear to ear.

“Good evening to you too, sir,” replied the boy.

Michelangelo noticed Salvatore was carrying a cloth sack when the boy said, “You were quite tense yesterday. I told my mother, and she thought this wine might relax you and allow your paints to flow freely.”

Michelangelo agreed with a jolly chuckle. Up on the scaffolding they went to start the evening’s work.

As Michelangelo drank the wine, the child sat content, listening to his stories. After four large glasses, Michelangelo passed out, lying flat on his back.

Then something remarkable happened.

Fredo saw the child pick up the brush sitting beside Michelangelo’s drunken body and begin to paint. The scaffolding’s construction allowed Michelangelo to paint while lying down, making it easy for Salvatore to reach the ceiling.

The painting coming from the hand of this child was amazing.

Fredo almost came out of hiding to stop the child, but then he noticed the work was better than anything he had ever seen. Mesmerized, Fredo continued watching the child paint. The tiny hand holding the brush looked out of place, but something magical was happening.

Soon daybreak arrived, and the child placed the brush back in Michelangelo's hand. Then he lay down next to the artist and closed his eyes.

A few seconds later, Michelangelo began to wake up.

"Salvatore, what happened here?" he asked.

"After you finished your wine, you began to paint throughout the night without a break. I became tired, and you said we should take a nap. That is all I remember."

Michelangelo stared at the painting for several minutes. Then, drawn out of his trance by the child touching his arm, he said, "We have done enough for tonight. Let us begin anew at dusk."

They climbed down the ladder and walked quietly out into the morning sun.

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Still stunned by what he had seen, Fredo thought of telling his friend, Priest Aristo. But he was not sure if he himself had been asleep and dreaming. Fredo decided to wait to see what happened the next night.

Just as the night before, at the end of the day Salvatore arrived carrying a bag containing a bottle of wine and a glass. For Fredo, it was like watching a scene from a play being repeated.

Michelangelo drank until he passed out. Then Salvatore picked up the brush and began to paint.

Throughout the night, the child worked. The only sound was the faint dabbling of the brush on the palette, accented by the snore of Michelangelo as he slept.

Again, at daybreak, the boy put the brush in his master's hand and lay down beside him. Almost as if on cue, Michelangelo woke and found the most amazing art—art he had no memory of creating.

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Fredo was confused about what to do. There was a child painting the ceiling of the most important church in Rome. This made it difficult to ignore the critical issues in his mind.

Who was this child artist? Why was he doing the work for Michelangelo? Why was he not telling anyone he created such a masterpiece? Why was he allowing everyone to believe Michelangelo was the creator?

Then he thought, who am I to stop this? He paints better than anyone I have ever seen—better than the greatest frescoes ever painted.

Months and years went by. The same ritual repeated night after night.

One night, Michelangelo noticed that Salvatore had not grown at all in the three years they had worked together. Salvatore explained that his family all looked young, as he did.

Michelangelo also asked, “We have celebrated my birthday three times, yet I do not recall you ever mentioning your birthday, Salvatore. When is it?”

“I was born May 10,” replied the child, who quickly found something else to do to avoid more questions.

As he drank his usual two bottles of wine, Michelangelo said, “We began working on this place May 10.”

Just as he uttered the last word, his head fell back onto the waiting pillow Salvatore had brought for him.

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Fredo began to analyze the young boy. He noticed it was true—Salvatore had not changed since the first day he saw him. His weight, height, and hair were the same. This seemed very strange.

Carefully, Fredo looked over his diary. There were several instances where he had written about changes in Michelangelo or even himself, but never anything about Salvatore.

Then, as suddenly as the question arrived in Fredo’s mind, he simply wrote in his journal, “It does not matter.”

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Every night, Fredo continued writing page after page of notes, describing every moment and each strange occurrence—like the night two prostitutes came into the Church looking for Michelangelo.

The women had heard that Michelangelo was a messenger of God. They wanted to ask if there was a place in Heaven for them.

Salvatore spoke with the two women for a long time, telling them yes, there was even a place in Heaven for them. He also told them stories of the Son of God, Jesus, and quoted from the Bible.

During this encounter, Fredo found himself captivated by the face of Salvatore. His every word seemed to embrace all who heard them. This was just one of many occurrences Fredo found enlightening.

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On the final night, Fredo decided to follow Salvatore home. He needed to know more about the child and how he managed to hide his artistic talent. Had Salvatore received tutoring from masters? Fredo believed he would only learn the answers by following the child home and asking his mother.

As usual, the night followed its course: the wine, Michelangelo sleeping, Salvatore painting, and Fredo writing down every movement—with one exception. The ceiling would be finished tonight.

Salvatore worked while the faint sound of Michelangelo's slumber rattled in the background. Then something magical happened.

With the final brushstroke, the ceiling became alive.

Fredo felt as though he had witnessed the birth of the universe. It was the first time he had looked at the entire painting, not just individual pieces. Fredo began to wonder if this was divine inspiration or divine intervention.

He had been writing frantically to keep a record of every stroke. He detailed how the art emerged and even included the aroma of the moisture in the air. But he had never truly *seen* the work before him.

When Salvatore finished, he placed the brush in Michelangelo's hand as he had done many times before, but this time it seemed done with reverence. He showed no joy or relief. He simply lay down next to Michelangelo, placed his head on the edge of the pillow, and closed his eyes.

As Michelangelo awoke, he was unable to speak. He looked at the ceiling, his mouth and eyes wide open. Every nerve in his body tingled.

*How could I create such work? God must have worked through me,* he thought.

Fredo and Michelangelo stared at the completed ceiling. For the first time, they pondered in disbelief—would this work last forever? Would it be revered as the greatest painting ever created?

Michelangelo and Salvatore climbed down from the scaffolding for the last time. The old man put his arm around the child's shoulder as they walked out of the Church.

“Thank you, Salvatore, for being such a fine assistant. I should probably thank your mother for letting you help me all this time.”

Salvatore looked up at the man with a smile as warm as an Italian summer and replied, “You will someday, but for now I must be going, Maestro.”

Without another word, Salvatore turned and walked away.

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As decided, Fredo followed Salvatore through the bustling streets of Rome. He struggled to understand why Salvatore kept stopping at insignificant places simply to stare—at a bakery to breathe in the aroma of fresh bread, or at a fish market to touch everything. It was as if he were taking mental notes.

As the sun began to set, Fredo noticed they were on a lonely road just outside Rome. It was forty miles to the next town, and they would never make it before nightfall. Still, Fredo followed at a distance.

After a few miles, they reached a wide, deep, slow-moving river. The bridge had been destroyed by an earlier rainstorm. Fredo thought the child would surely turn back.

Instead, he watched Salvatore walk down to the water's edge and continue forward—step by step—across the river as if the water were solid rock.

When Salvatore reached the other side, he continued into the sunset, never looking back.

Fredo watched until the child disappeared into the distance.

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**The End**

