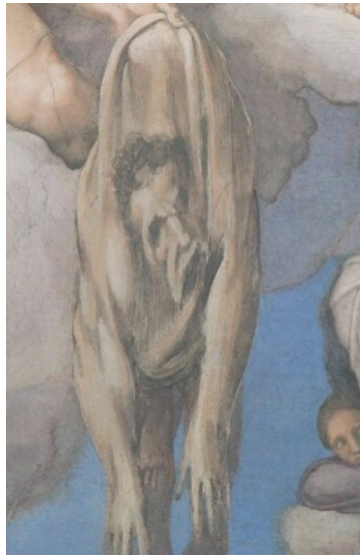


# Michelangelo's Self-portrait: A visual illusion from a visual artist

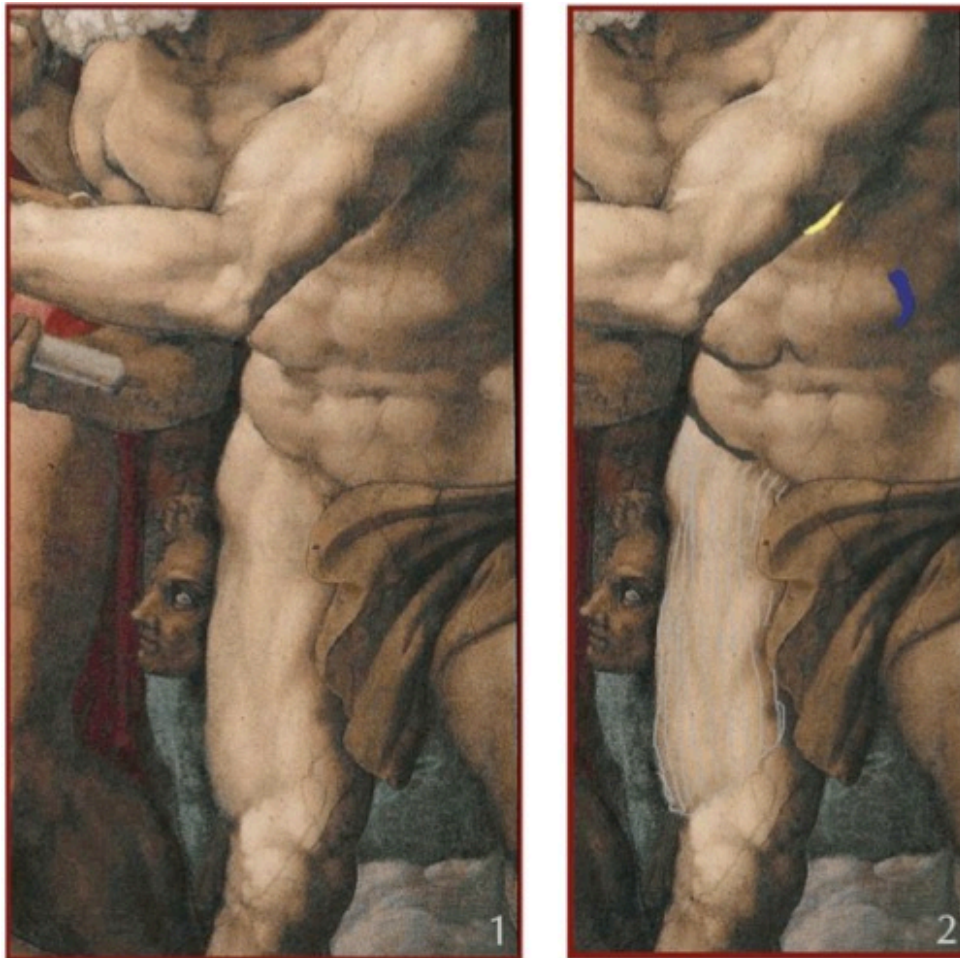
by

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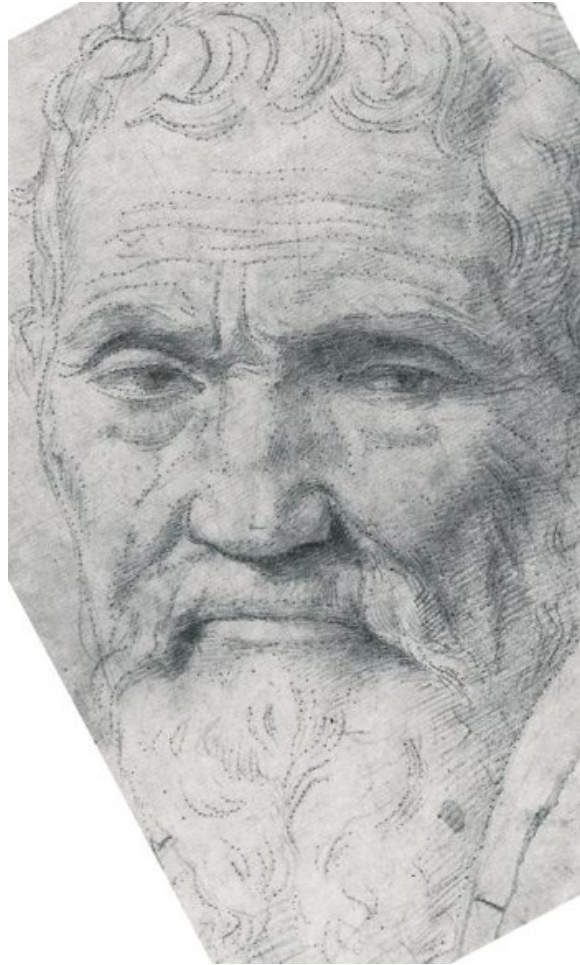
Michelangelo, Detail of St. Bartholomew's  
flayed skin in *The Last Judgement*

Only one self-portrait of Michelangelo has ever been found, the well-known flap of skin meant to represent the flayed features of St. Bartholomew in the *Last Judgment*. Even this accepted truth is in doubt because the standing figure of St. Bartholomew, holding his own skin, looks nothing like Michelangelo.....unless, of course, the inconsistency suggests that artists take on multiple *personae* in art, many looking nothing like the artist at all, eg. St. Bartholomew. Whatever the truth no-one has noticed that just above and to the left of Michelangelo's contorted features in the flayed skin is a far more conventional portrait, the only known self-portrait of Michelangelo *as Michelangelo*. Yet, though the likeness may be conventional, the setting is not: the torso and thigh of St. Peter.



Michelangelo, Detail of St. Peter in *The Last Judgement* with diagram

A visual artist Michelangelo has presented himself as a visual illusion in semi-profile looking to the left towards Christ. Here's how. Using the diagram above right, locate his "left eye", only the left edge of which can just be seen in the curving line of light (yellow mark) under St. Peter's tricep. (All features in inverted commas are part of the self-portrait.) Most of the "eye" is intentionally hidden by the saint's arm which obscures Michelangelo's forehead and right eye as well. Part of his "nose" and its broad "nostril", though, can be found in St. Peter's ribs, on the left by the elbow. Supporting this perception is the shadow under his "nostril"; it makes no sense on a torso, suggesting a whole piece of Peter's torso to the left of it is missing. It only makes sense as the shadow of a projecting "nose". His "mouth" is the dark fold around Peter's hip (black mark) while his long "beard" can be seen flowing down Peter's thigh (gray lines). A bulging muscle on the right of his torso (marked blue) replicates the artist's high "cheekbone". If you cannot see the "self-portrait" immediately, keep trying. He did not intend it to be easy, just magical.



Daniele da Volterra, *Portrait of Michelangelo* (detail rotated)

For comparison's sake, take a look at Daniele da Volterra's contemporary portrait of Michelangelo. Although it is drawn face-on, not to the left in semi-profile, it nevertheless makes clear that Michelangelo had a broad, flat nose and high cheekbones similar to those depicted in the torso and thigh of St. Peter.