

# Eve's Idle Hand

LEO STEINBERG

Last semester at Hunter College, New York, a class of 34 graduate students engaged in a Spring-long Michelangelo celebration (alias ARH 780) to honor the artist's 500th birthday—on which day, March 6, 1975, we toasted the old *divino* and communed over a cake emblazed with the profile of the *David* in tasteful pink and green icing. It was in a greyer mood, five weeks later, that I announced the forthcoming test—a hard-headed question-and-answer test; but students wishing to better their grade could submit an additional paper on a small, inconspicuous detail of the Sistine Ceiling: Eve's idle hand in the fresco depicting the *Temptation and Expulsion from Paradise* (Figs. 1 and 2). The fresco had not been discussed in class, and no further directives were given, so that students were free to handle the subject as they saw fit—or to leave it alone. Indeed, one bright-eyed pessimist confided to me that no one would touch it, since they suspected a trick: an idle hand, by definition, does nothing and no one wants to be caught discoursing on nothing to the tune of 500 words. Yet, on the day of the test, we harvested 17 papers on that thankless theme.

The opinions put forth in these papers do not necessarily represent the views of the management. Whatever influence ARH 780 may have exerted would have come through discussions of other works from which students extrapolated certain general notions, as for example:

- that the significance of a Michelangelo gesture is best understood when you perform and repeat it;
- that Michelangelo's meanings, even the most metaphysical, are articulate in his "body language";
- that his creatures are ambidextrous—a single hand action alone tends to reveal less than half;
- that any detail in a Michelangelo fresco should be seen in its

largest subordination, even to the structural frame, the decorative fabric, the architectural set; that Michelangelo's paintings are best thought of as containing no expendable trifles; and that a detail in a Ceiling *istoria* too small to be seen from the Chapel floor may embody the secret cause of the all-apparent effect; and finally, as regards the incidence of sexual allusion in Michelangelo's oeuvre: that one need not go digging for it, but that, being struck by its presence, it would be improper to suppress what one sees.

What one sees (and what such seeing gives rise to) is set forth in the following testimonies—15 of them. If these seem occasionally to overlap, so much the better, for they represent 15 autonomous depositions. Collectively, these papers make a genuine contribution to our conception of Michelangelo's program for the Sistine Ceiling. I therefore present them here by permission of the contributors—abridged in form but with minimal editing—and with a brief postscript by way of *envoi*.

At first glance the right hand of Eve appears relaxed and idle, but if one tries to assume Eve's position, arm and hand turn out to be awkward, unnatural, and quite active. Michelangelo has purposely distorted Eve's hand to make it point at her sex. The pointing is done with the middle finger, which in contemporary culture is a phallic sign, and possibly was then too. Moreover, the hand is placed, as is Eve's body, between the legs of Adam, which further corroborates a sexual interpretation. There is also a strong diagonal line from the right hand to the left that takes hold of the apple. The Original Sin of enticing Adam with the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil is matched by the action of Eve's right hand which tempts him with the fruits of her body. The more obvious action of her

↙ The *Creation of Eve* scene divides the Sistine Chapel into cleric and lay. Flanking the *Creation of Eve* are the *Temptation and Expulsion* and the *Creation of Adam*, both of which include significant digit motifs. In the *Creation of Adam*, the right index of God the Father is about to touch or "animate" Adam. The figure of the first man is usually described as somewhat listless, or languorous—waiting for the transmission of power, his body leaning back on an idle hand. But the fingers of this hand are curled and point axially to his tool of creation, a portentous gesture since he is the First man.

In the *Temptation* panel, Eve's right hand seems similarly idle but it points again to the seat of her fertility. Her posture suggests the sort of luxurious idleness that was supposed to have engendered sinful thoughts. But her gesture indicates that she is about to become aware of her nakedness, of which she will soon be ashamed. Her whole body seems to lean on that hand which points to her procreative powers, the source also of Man's redemption, foretelling the begetting of Christ. She is the source of the generations to come, Mother of Mankind. She is Eve. She is Mary. (Carolee Thea)