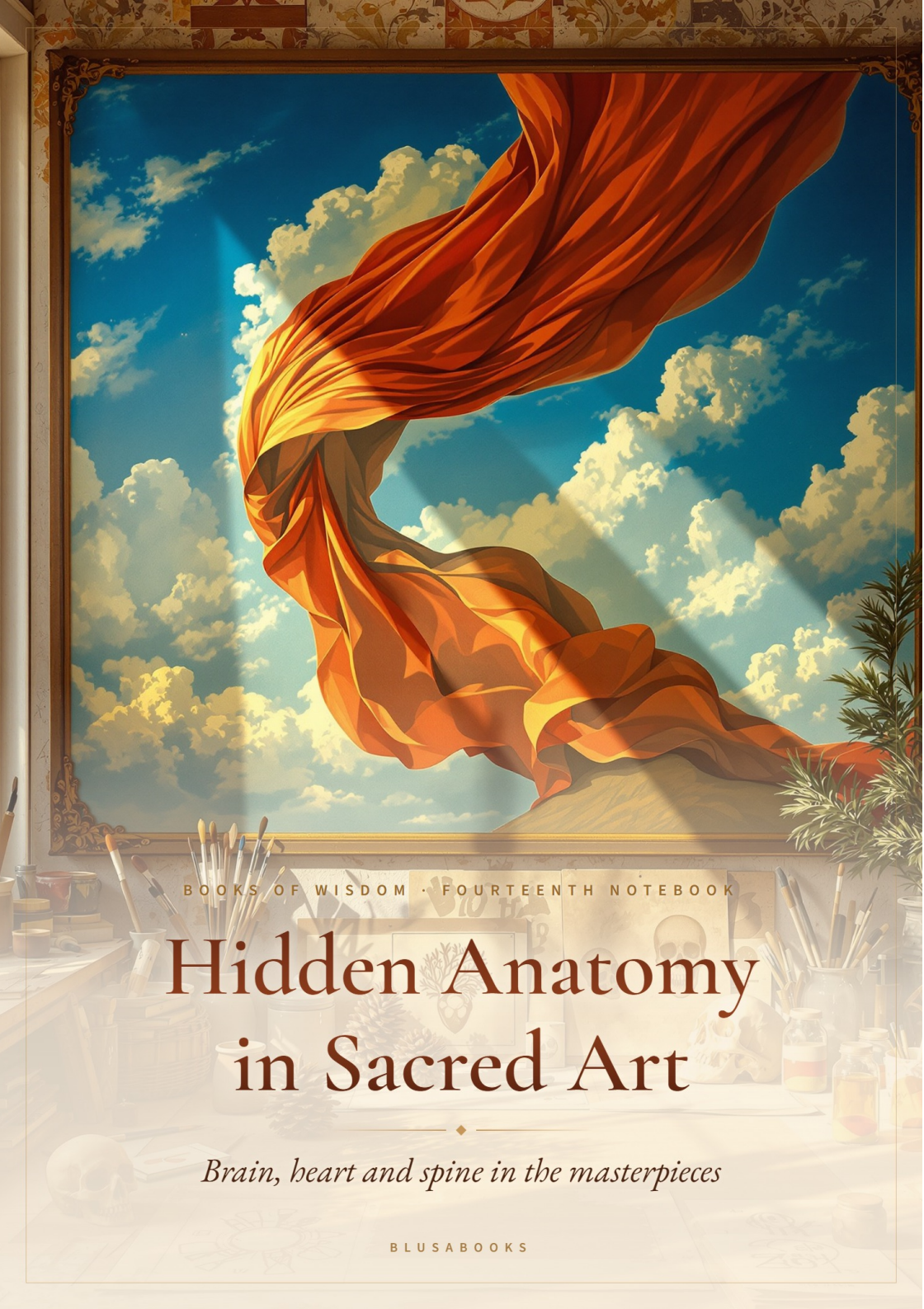




BOOKS OF WISDOM · FOURTEENTH NOTEBOOK

Hidden Anatomy in Sacred Art

Brain, heart and spine in the masterpieces

BLUSABOOKS



Hidden Anatomy in Sacred Art

BRAIN, HEART AND SPINE IN THE MASTERPIECES

Every chapter — four parts

WHAT WE SEE

the work up close and the hidden-anatomy hypothesis

IN PLAIN WORDS

the same, short and clear

TERMS

words from art and medicine

WHAT ART HISTORY SAYS

what is documented, what is interpretation, what is coincidence

This book retells hypotheses; it does not endorse them. Look for yourself.

Books of Wisdom · MMXXVI

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FOREWORD

Imagine standing in the Sistine Chapel, head tilted back, looking up at the most famous pair of hands in the world. Thousands of people see the same thing every day, and yet it was only at the end of the 20th century that a doctor noticed that the image above them might be more than a cloak and a cluster of angels. Could that really be so? This book begins with exactly that question.

For centuries, sacred art has spoken in symbols: Egyptian pillars and eyes, Renaissance frescoes and drawings, staircases, pine cones and the horns of gods. In our own time, a fascinating idea has grown up around them — that artists and priests hid a map of the human body in these images: the brain, the spine, the nerves, the heart. Sometimes the idea has a real basis, because artists really did dissect corpses and knew anatomy better than many physicians. Sometimes it is simply our own eye, finding faces in the clouds.

Each chapter has four parts. In the first — "What we see" — we look closely at the work, detail by detail, and tell the story of the hidden anatomy hypothesis with all its excitement. In the second, the same story is told briefly and in plain words. The third explains the terms that help us understand both the art and the medicine; they are also collected in a glossary at the end of the book. The fourth — "What art history says" — covers what historians and anatomists think: what is documented, what is interpretation, and what is most likely coincidence.

We mock nothing and present nothing as final truth. A good question is worth more than a quick answer, and learning to tell "it looks like" from "it has been proven" is a skill that will serve you well beyond the museum.

At the end of the book you will find printable pages with drawings and comparisons that you can place beside the real works and check with your own eyes. Take a magnifying glass, open a good reproduction and look for yourself — then decide what you see.

CHAPTER I

MICHELANGELO'S "THE CREATION OF ADAM" — A BRAIN IN THE HEAVENS

WHAT WE SEE

The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican is one of the largest works of art ever created by a single person. Michelangelo painted it between 1508 and 1512, commissioned by Pope Julius II, even though he considered himself a sculptor rather than a painter. In nine central scenes he told the opening of the Book of Genesis, and in one of them — "The Creation of Adam" — there are two hands known to the whole world.

Look carefully. On the left, Adam reclines on a green hillside — beautiful, strong, yet languid, as if not yet fully awake. His arm rises lazily, his finger drooping. On the right, God flies toward him, carried by wingless angels, all wrapped in a broad reddish cloak that forms an oval, almost completely closed shape. God's finger is outstretched and tense. Between the two fingers there remains a narrow gap — and the whole scene lives in that gap.

One more detail heightens the effect. The edge of the cloak is smooth and rounded, as if traced with an outline, and the angels' bodies are packed inside it so that they fill the whole shape with almost no empty space. From below, from a distance of about twenty meters, a viewer can barely make out such nuances. But the artist, who spent four years on scaffolding working right up against the plaster, saw every line and every fold. If something was hidden, it was hidden from the crowd — but not from someone who knows how to look.

In 1990, the American physician Frank Lynn Meshberger published an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* that made people see this scene with new eyes. He noticed that **the outline of the cloak with the angels inside resembles a human brain cut lengthwise**. Meshberger pointed out the details:

- the folds of the cloak correspond to the grooves of the brain, and one deep fold runs where the brain has the Sylvian fissure;
- below the oval hang an angel's leg and the end of a piece of cloth, resembling the pituitary gland and its stalk;
- the green scarf fluttering beneath the cloak, in his view, recalls the vertebral artery;
- the angels beneath God sit where the brainstem would be, while God's arm reaches out through the forehead — through the part of the brain associated with reasoning and intention.

A beautiful thought follows from this. Adam is already alive: his eyes are open, his body full of strength. So God is not giving him life. **According to Meshberger's hypothesis, God is giving Adam a mind** — the ability to think, to choose, to understand. The divine spark is not breath but consciousness, and Michelangelo supposedly painted it literally, in the shape of a brain.

Was Michelangelo capable of something like this? His contemporaries and biographers Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi write that as a young man in Florence, at the hospital of the monastery of Santo Spirito, he dissected the bodies of the dead to understand muscles and bones. In gratitude to the prior of the monastery, he carved a wooden crucifix. **Michelangelo knew anatomy with his own hands**, not just from books.

Some go even further. They say the image of the brain is a hidden message to the Church: the divine dwells in the human head, not in outward rituals. Others notice that with his left arm God embraces a female figure who is watching Adam — perhaps Eve, not yet created, perhaps Wisdom. And there is an entirely

different hypothesis too: the cloak together with the green scarf resembles a womb with an umbilical cord, and the scene is not the moment of the mind but the moment of birth.



FIGURE 1

God in a reddish cloak full of angels; in 1990 a physician saw in this oval a lengthwise section of the brain.

IN PLAIN WORDS

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo painted God touching Adam. In 1990 a doctor noticed that the cloak around God and the angels is shaped like a human brain seen in cross-section. He concluded that God is giving Adam not life but a mind. Michelangelo really did study dead bodies as a young man, so the idea is not impossible. Others see a womb in the very same cloak, so a firm answer has still not been found.

TERMS

Fresco (It. *fresco* "fresh") — a painting made on still-wet lime plaster, so that the paint soaks into the wall and becomes part of it.

Dissection (Lat. *sectio* "cutting") — opening and examining a dead body to learn the structure of the organs or the cause of death.

Neuroanatomy (Gr. *neuron* "nerve" + *anatōmē* "cutting up") — the science of the structure of the nervous system and the brain.

Sylvian fissure (Lat. *fissura Sylvii*) — a deep groove on the side of the brain that separates the temporal lobe from the frontal and parietal lobes.

Pituitary gland (Gr. *hypophysis* "outgrowth below") — a small gland at the base of the brain that uses hormones to control many other glands.

Pareidolia (Gr. *para* "beside" + *eidōlon* "image") — the mind's tendency to see familiar images in random shapes, such as faces in the clouds.

● WHAT ART HISTORY SAYS

The facts are these. The ceiling really was painted between 1508 and 1512, and Michelangelo's anatomical knowledge is well documented: both of his biographers write about the dissections, and his drawings show muscles that only someone who had seen them beneath the skin could draw. So Meshberger's idea is not absurd — an artist who knew the shape of the brain could, in principle, have reproduced it.

Yet no document confirms it. Not in Michelangelo's letters, not in his poems, not in his biographers' writings, not in the records of the papal court is there a single word about a brain in the cloak. That does not mean it could not be so, but it does mean it is an interpretation, not a discovered fact. Most art historians regard it as an interesting but unproven hypothesis. We should also remember that the ceiling's program was approved by the papal court, and Michelangelo was painting a Bible story