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Henri Temianka Correspondence; (istone)

Henri Temianka

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MICHELANGELO AND HIS POSITION

Today it's Signor Mancinelli
whose chin is pressed against his belly
whose buttocks now feel like a crupper
he knows he's eaten his last supper
his loins and paunch and big breastbone
crushed by that giant, Irving Stone

with warm regards from

Henry (Pianista)

March 7, 1985

March 7, 1985

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Michelangelo and His Position

The Times (Feb. 25) had on its front page a story from Vatican City quoting Curator Fabrizio Mancinelli of the Vatican, charging me with perpetuating the "myth" in "The Agony and the Ecstasy," my biographical novel about Michelangelo, that Michelangelo frequently worked, at the top of his enormously high scaffolding just under the Sistine vault, sometimes in a sitting position and sometimes lying down.

Where and by whom did this alleged myth originate? By Michelangelo himself, circa August, 1509, in one of his great poems called: "On the Painting of the Sistine Chapel":

*I've grown a goitre by dwelling in
this den—*

*as cats from stagnant streams in
Lombardy,*

*or in what other land they hap to
be—*

*which drives the belly close be-
neath the chin:*

*my beard turns up to heaven; my
nape falls in,*

*fixed on my spine: my breastbone
visibly*

*grows like harp: a rich embroidery
bedews by face from brush-drops
thick and thin.*

*My loins into my paunch like
levers grind:*

*my buttock like a crupper bears
my weight; . . .*

"Driving the belly close beneath the chin" while standing up is impossible. When Michelangelo wrote, "my buttock like a crupper bears my weight," he is telling us that he was painting on his buttocks, either in a sitting down position or reclining. If any man ever painted standing up on his buttocks I have yet to hear about it.

Since I have long been an honorary Italian (*Commendatore, Grande Ufficiale*), I dislike criticizing my fellow countryman. But whom are we to believe? Michelangelo who wrote about his fate and position while working on the Ceiling, or Curator Mancinelli, who comes along 476 years later to inform us that Michelangelo did not know what he was talking about?

Has anyone at The Times ever tried to "drive his belly close beneath his chin" while standing up? Has he or she ever tried having "his buttock like a crupper bear his weight" while erect? These might be interesting anatomical experiments.

IRVING STONE
Beverly Hills