

BEHOLD THE SISTINE CHAPEL AS NEVER BEFORE

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Before opening its advance sales on November 1, a PR officer at Callaway Arts and Entertainment in Manhattan sent out a flyer about its forthcoming publication *The Sistine Chapel*. November 1 was intentional; it's All Saints' Day, but also the day in 1512 that the Sistine Chapel's ceiling was first exhibited to the public.

This *unicum*, a masterpiece, a work of art, a legacy, a collector's dream, is divided, like the Sistine Chapel itself, into three separate sections and is presented in chronological order. Volume 1 contains "The Frescoes of the 15th Century," by Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Signorelli, and other Renaissance masters. Volume 2 contains "The Ceiling," depicting the story of mankind from the Creation to the Coming of Christ in frescoes commissioned by Pope Julius II (r. 1503-1513) and painted by Michelangelo from 1508-1512. Volume 3 contains the frescoes commissioned by Pope Paul III (r. 1534-1545), again painted by Michelangelo (from 1534-1541), of *The Last Judgment* and *The Second Coming of Christ*. All the texts, essays and captions are by Antonio Paolucci, the former director of the Vatican Museums (2007-2016), previously in sequence the Director General of Cultural Heritage from 1980-2006 of Venice, Verona, Mantua and finally Florence, with an interval as Italy's Minister of Culture from 1995-96.

Callaway's website www.callaway.com bullets many special features of the trilogy:

—English translations of Paolucci's writings by art historian Frank Dabell, translator of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2017 exhibition: *Michelangelo: Divine*

Details of Christ in the center of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*



Draftsman and Designer

—The trim size of each volume is 24 x 17 inches vertical

—The weight of each book is approximately 20 lbs. or 60 lbs. for the set

—822 total pages

—Printed in six-color offset lithography, including 220 24 x 51 inch gatefolds

—The Bodoniana bindings handmade in silk with metallic ink and white calf leather spines stamped in silver, gold and platinum foil

—Typographic design by Jerry Kelly

—Debossed handmade endpapers based on the Cosmati mosaic tile floor pattern of the Sistine Chapel

—Custom handmade box

—Retail price \$22,000 for the set, with shipping and handling

—Available for purchase December 1, 2020

Not included in this list, since not a Callaway project,

are the volumes' breathtaking photographs (copyrighted by the Vatican Museums). A team of Vatican photographers took some 270,000 images on 65 consecutive nights, when the Sistine Chapel was closed. They used a 33-foot tall scaffolding and rig to capture every inch of the Chapel's frescoes with advanced optics and digital photography. According to Callaway's website: "The team utilized three-dimensional reconstruction software to stitch together seamlessly all 270,000 individual frames to reproduce the Chapel to an unprecedented level of color [99.4% accurate] and detail [1:1 scale]. The result is the first opportunity in history for viewers to see the frescoes... with images so detailed and sharp and immersive that you feel you are there next to the artist, seeing in extreme close-up the precise colors, textures, even the artist's individual brush strokes."

For an insider's account of this remarkable collaboration between the Vatican Museums, the distinguished Bolognese publisher *Scripta Maneant*, and Callaway, I exchanged several e-mails with Manuela Roosevelt, the editorial director of Callaway since 2014. I also met in person here in Rome with Frank Dabell. Callaway hired him because of his numerous translations for the Met during and since his two-year Fellowship there in the mid-1980s. Besides the Met, Dabell has translated catalogs from French and Italian for the Frick Collection, the National Gallery in London, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

From Roosevelt I learned that Callaway's inspiration to approach the Vatican Museums about participating in this project was a two-volume set, *Sistine Chapel*, published in 1991 by Knopf. Callaway's *The Sistine Chapel* was five years in the making, the arrangements signed and sealed during Paolucci's directorship.

During the project's first two years, *Scripta Maneant* published three other simpler versions, one in Italian which cost 1,000 euros and sold out immediately, one in Polish and one in Russian. The photographs are the same in all four editions, as are Paolucci's writings.

"The Vatican Museums limited the total number of all editions to 1,999, never to be reprinted in this format again," Roosevelt wrote me. "We determined that we could comfortably sell 600 sets of the English edition."

"The differences between editions," Roosevelt continued, "are in the typographic treatment and in the finishing and binding choices for each edition. The covers of the Italian edition, for instance, are paper-over board with a composite leather spine. Our seemingly exorbitant price-tag is the result of the higher costs of the materials used in our edition and, of course, the higher manufacturing costs with everything being handmade. Although we don't disclose the names of our customers, I can confirm many are international and that sales are already robust."

Until December 1, the volumes could only be ordered from Callaway's website, and they were shipped worldwide from *Scripta Maneant*. Now the set can also be ordered from Neiman Marcus, Gumps in San Francisco, and Barnes & Noble bookstores. "Once museums re-open," continued Roosevelt, "we hope that some will sell our edition. Although the Vatican Museums own the copyright to the art, Callaway sets

aren't sold there or elsewhere in Rome. *Scripta Maneant* recently told us that not even Pope Francis has a set, neither the Italian nor our English edition. Nonetheless, a percentage from every sale of every edition goes to supporting the ongoing conservation efforts of the Vatican Museums and of the Sistine Chapel. We also match financially donations to public institutions and libraries, college art departments, churches, and dioceses."

The Sistine Chapel is Callaway's first project with the Vatican, but Roosevelt confirmed that they're considering several others together with *Scripta Maneant*.

Dabell, instead, isn't a newcomer to Rome; he grew up here because his British father was a hydraulic engineer at the FAO. Nor is he a newcomer to Vatican projects. For example, in 2016, he co-curated with Paolucci the exhibition in Forlì, *Piero della Francesca. Indagine su un mito*.

Regarding *The Sistine Chapel*, Dabell told me, "The introductory essays to each volume aren't over-academic; they are: 'This is Paolucci speaking.' I could have been participating in a one-to-one guided tour with Paolucci or attending a lecture with a slide show by him. When I translate, I want to capture the author's tone, in this case an expert, who is also very devout, so



Detail from *The Creation of Adam* in the central section of the scenes from the Book of Genesis on the Sistine Chapel ceiling

I wanted to transmit Paolucci's faith. In the opening introduction, he points out that the Sistine Chapel is an artwork of faith, even if it's possible to appreciate its art without considering its context. But, if you have faith, a visit to the Sistine Chapel or reading this book will be a richer experience."

"My job," explained Dabell, "was to match the images with the appropriate words because we only have words to describe music, to describe painting, to describe all art forms. It's a huge challenge to find the appropriate words, particularly for colors, because they change during the day and in different seasons. For examples, the words *orange* or *brown* are too generic, so I opted for nuances like *apricot* and *chestnut*. I also deliberately translated the volumes in their chronological order because I read *The Sistine Chapel* as an organic piece and sought a consistent style.

"Another challenge of translation is not the length, but the density of the text," Dabell continued. "Italian can be long-winded, to put it rudely. Unlike Italian, in English we don't have one very long sentence or paragraph filling a page; we have three."

Of Books, Art and People

After studying art history at Oxford and the Courtauld Institute, followed by his Fellowship at the Metropolitan, Dabell remained in New York writing catalogs for the distinguished Piero Corsini Gallery, no longer in existence, and lecturing at the Met. In 2001 he returned to Rome, “because Rome was and still is my comfort zone... I find myself at ease in the Sistine Chapel. I’ve been hundreds of times but each time I see something new. I still can’t claim to know every inch of it; I will when I see Callaway’s set... I can’t wait! For now, if I’m lying in bed with my eyes closed, I can take myself through the scenes on the ceiling. So writing this translation was to translate those images into my own words via Paolucci’s. It forced me to look even more closely at something I thought I already knew.”

In addition to the Sistine Chapel, Dabell is at home with Piero della Francesca. “Certainly my most gratifying experience during the last three years was being the only non-Ital-



Detail of *The Baptism of Christ* by Pietro Perugino

ian on the supervisory committee for the conservation of Piero’s *Resurrection* in San Sepolcro,” he said.

Besides translating and curating, Dabell has been a professor at Temple University in Rome since 2003 and on the art history faculty of Rome’s University (the *Tor Vergata* branch) since 2018. In addition, he’s taught at Dartmouth College’s Foreign Study Program and at the *Università per gli Stranieri* in Perugia. He’s a frequent guest lecturer for museum journeys in Europe and the Mediterranean (most recently in Thessaloniki and Athens: *The Legacy of Alexander the Great* for the Met, in 2019) as well as in Russia and North Africa.

Dabell’s next Vatican project is one of several lectures by distinguished art historians to be shown on the internet exclusively for the Patrons of the Art in the Vatican Museums. His lecture’s title is: “*Fra Angelico, Pinturicchio, and the Dream Team of Florentine Art. The Quattrocento Painters in the Papal Chapels and Apartments.*” ○