

**Jakob Burckhardt: DER CICERONE**  
**Vol III: Malerei**

**Burckhardt, Jacob**

Der Cicerone: eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens (Band 3): Malerei (Nebst Register über alle drei Theile) — Basel, 1860, pp.876-77

<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/burckhardt1860bd3/0166>

Michelangelo's greatest error came from deep within his being. Since he had long parted company with everything considered as ecclesiastical norms or as a religious appeal to the heart, and since he always and consistently represents human beings – whoever they may be – with exalted physical power, in which nakedness was an integral part of his statement, there is absolutely no recognisable difference between saints, the blessed, and the damned. The portrayals of the higher groups are made no more ideal, their movements no nobler than those of the lower. One seeks in vain for that restful glory of angels, apostles and holy ones, which in other pictures of this subject simply through their clear symmetry exalt the main figure, greatly raising the Judge, fully so by Orcagna and Fiesole who, with their wonderful expression of spirit, create a spiritual cloud around him. Naked figures, as Michelangelo wished them, can in no way serve to express such an atmosphere; they require gestures, movement and a quite different gradation of motives. The master had indeed foreseen this last point. Indeed there are in his works many and very great poetic thoughts; of the two upper groups of angels, the one on the left with the instruments of martyrdom is splendid in its onrush; Life wrestles itself wonderfully from Death with the rising souls that have been saved. The wavering damned are represented in two groups, of which one is powerfully pushed back by combative angels and torn back by devils, forming a quite extraordinary demonic scene; the other, however, presents that figure of deepest shame, which is dragged down as if by a heavy weight by two angry spirits clinging together. The lower scene to the right, where a demon with a raised oar chases the unhappy souls out of the boat, and as they are taken into captivity by the servants of hell, is carried over with grandiose audacity from an indefinite into a definitely sensory scene, etc. As significant as this poetic substance emerges on closer inspection, yet the determining element was the scenic conception as a whole. Michelangelo revels in the Promethian bliss of being able to summon into reality every possibility of movement, position, foreshortening and grouping of the outright human figure. The Last Judgement was the only scene which, by virtue of the figures floating freely, allowed absolute liberty in this. From a scenic point of view, it is indeed a work certain of eternal admiration. It would be pointless to try and enumerate each motive individually; no part of the whole great composition is neglected in this regard; one can question the why and how of position and movement and will receive answers.

Even if the group around the Judge with their display of the instruments of martyrdom may awaken distaste with their brutal call for retribution, even if the Judge of the World is just a figure like any other and indeed one of the most bashful, the complete ensemble remains unique in the world.