

Half a millennium of ceiling splendour

Five hundred years ago, Michelangelo Buonarroti was in the initial stages of his work decorating the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. Having first mounted the scaffolding on 10 May 1508, he was to spend hours at a time on his back in arduous single-handed labour for nearly four years.

Pope Julius II had prevailed upon him to complete the chapel's decoration with ceiling paintings. The chapel had great symbolic meaning for the papacy as the chief consecrated space in the Vatican, used for important ceremonies such as electing and inaugurating new popes.

Michelangelo was pre-eminent in the High Renaissance as an architect, sculptor, painter and poet. The archetypal tormented genius, he was rarely satisfied with his enormous talent.

The friendship of the artist and the pope was enduring, despite recurrent strains imposed by two overly similar strong-willed personalities. There seems to have been a contretemps in 1510–11 when no payments were forthcoming and Michelangelo downed



brushes for a period. The finished work would nonetheless prove to be a product of the artistic symbiosis of the two men.

At first Michelangelo was unhappy with the commission because he considered himself to be primarily a sculptor. He had done little painting since he was an apprentice in Domenico Ghirlandajo's studio in his teens. He suspected that the pope had chosen him on the cunning recommendation of the ar-

chitect Donato Bramante who, jealous of Michelangelo's talents, had proposed him only because his lack of experience painting frescos would doom him to failure. But Michelangelo knew that if he declined the commission he might not get another one from Julius, and he undoubtedly thought his own genius would carry him through.

It required a brilliant imagination to devise a scheme in which the whole vast ceiling was united. As Michelangelo proceeded he quickly grew in confidence, reducing and finally eliminating such preparatory helps as complete drawings and incisions in the plaster surface.

The ceiling as a whole includes nearly 350 figures in a rich variety of poses that have been drawn on by artists ever since. Michelangelo's women are as sturdy and muscled as his men, possibly because his models for all the figures were men.

The chapel was officially opened on 31 October 1512. The ceiling was hailed as a supreme work of art, and it earned its artist the name of "il divino Michelangelo".

An essentially English humour

"Ahh. Oh dear. Mm. Oh dear, oh dear. Ahh, dear me. Ahh. Stone me, what a life." This series of groans, the opening line of an episode of *Hancock's Half-Hour*, was treasured by the viewing public of the late 1950s. Tony Hancock was able to clear the streets like few others, as families gathered to watch each eagerly awaited BBC programme.

Graduating from such radio attractions as *Educating Archie*, he was given his own show in 1954. He starred as Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock, an out-of-work comedian, pretentious and snobby, living in the shabby 23 Railway Cuttings in East Cheam. The strength of the half-hour lay in comedy of character and situation rather than set jokes. The show was hugely successful and transferred to television in 1956.

Hancock's face fitted the character to perfection: there were the heavy jowls, the creases, the sunken and pouchy eyes, the turned-down corners of the mouth. Sid James, his partner in the constant disasters — financial, social and professional — which beset them, had a face along similar lines. Frequently the programme was an evocation of a dreary 1950s Sunday afternoon. For a few years there was no comedian of comparable popularity and he was the first television artist of any genre to be paid more than £1,000 for a single half-hour programme.

Tiring of his familiar routines, Hancock tried to go it alone in other comic realms. Seldom has a career in entertainment plummeted so spectacularly. His worst decision was to break with his scriptwriters, Alan Simpson and Ray Galton, who had produced sketches that suited him so perfectly. He made three poor films and an unsuccessful ITV series. He was always highly self-critical and he read voraciously, desperately trying to answer the "why are we here?" of life. Forty years ago, on 25 June 1968, he tragically took his own life by drug overdose.

The Homburg hat, the shabby fur-collared overcoat and the grand manner were all so splendidly incongruous either in a fish and chip parlour or at 23 Railway Cuttings. And to accompany the run-down clothing there was the look of total gloom and despondency. Hancock's genius epitomised purely British humour, a brand so incomprehensible to other nations.

The curious fifth element of taste

Sweet, sour, bitter, salty — and umami. In 1908, Professor Kikunae Ikeda of Tokyo University identified the material he isolated from a kelp broth as glutamic acid. He found that its salt monosodium glutamate (MSG) gave an enhanced and meaty flavour to vegetable dishes and he named the crystals umami (Japanese for savoury or meaty).

What is curious about monosodium glutamate is that it does not add a specific taste of its own, as does salt. Instead, it seems to increase the sensitivity of taste receptors thus "multiplying" the natural flavour of meat and vegetables. But it does not have the same effect on fruits, sweet foods or eggs.

Mushrooms contain a large number of proteins based on glutamic acid and this might account for their slightly meaty flavour and the fact that they are often served with meat dishes.

Umami is the taste of protein in meat, cheese and fish. The importance of protein in our diet means that it makes sense for umami to create a pleasurable sensation in the brain, unlike bitterness, for example, which indicates danger.

Umami was only confirmed as the true "fifth taste" in 2000, when researchers at the University of Miami reported their discovery of a protein receptor on the human tongue. A mature, robust red wine has the umami taste.

The Ajinomoto ("essence of taste") company was formed to manufacture and market MSG in Japan and the taste-enhancer remains the company's signature product. It is now produced by the large-scale fermentation of starch or sugar.

Chinese restaurant syndrome (Kwok's disease), with its mildly unpleasant symptoms of numbness in the neck, arms and back, weakness and palpitations, was traced to extravagant use of MSG by some Chinese chefs. It does not affect a large percentage of the population and has been relegated to the status of urban legend.

In fact MSG is more of a solution than a problem: if used as a replacement for salt it is possible to reduce sodium levels while still enjoying a tasty dish.