Pope Julius II
In 1503, Giuliano della Rovere was consecrated as Pope Julius II. His nicknames “Warrior Pope” and “Il Papa Terrible,” along with his selection of the name Julius – a reference to Julius Caesar – emphasize the influence of the Roman Empire on Julius II’s papacy.

Julius II recognized the propagandistic value of the visual arts. After his election, he commissioned works that would “present an authoritative image of his rule and reinforce the primacy of the Catholic Church” (Kleiner and Mamiya, 255). Of central interest to Pope Julius II was Old Saint Peter’s. The basilica, which had been commissioned by Constantine in 319 C.E., was now in a state of ruin. Julius II ordered the church to be demolished and rebuilt. Over the next one hundred and sixty years, Old Saint Peter’s would become Saint Peter’s Basilica, and along with several additional structures, would comprise Vatican City.

Architecture
Named after Pope Sixtus IV, the Sistine Chapel is the private chapel of the pope, and also the location of Papal Conclaves [assembly of cardinals for electing the pope]. Though not as old as Saint Peter’s, the Sistine Chapel was likewise in disrepair at the beginning of the sixteenth century. By 1504, a large, ominous crack appeared in the ceiling, after subsidence in the foundation caused the chapel to tilt.

Designed and built by Baccio Pontelli in 1477, the Chapel itself was modeled after the proportions given in the Bible of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. It is twice as long as high, and three times as long as it is wide (130 feet long x 43 feet wide x 65 feet high). The Sistine Chapel was built as a fortress with walls ten feet thick at the base. There is a walkway around the top for sentinels [guards] and arrow-slits for arches. There are also special holes in the walls for boiling oil to be poured on attackers.

Pope Julius II used the crack in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as momentum to commission frescoes that would ensure the power and glory of the papacy. The original fresco, painted in 1483 by Pier Matteo d’Amelia, was an ultramarine sky filled with gold stars. This ceiling was torn down as Julius II searched for the most skilled artist in Rome to complete his mission.
Michelangelo
In 1508, Julius II approached a reluctant Michelangelo to repaint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Michelangelo, whose sculpture David had already attracted the attention of Pope Julius II, insisted that painting was not his profession. However, he accepted the commission because he was promised the commission of Pope Julius II’s tomb. Michelangelo believed this commission would be the most significant of his life. Thus, he accepted the commission of the Sistine Chapel, but defiantly signed his contract “Sculptore.”

Painting the Sistine Chapel
Michelangelo worked on the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes from 1508-1512. However, records suggest that Michelangelo actually only painted for 150 days during this period. The majority of Michelangelo’s time was spent on preparatory drawings and making the pigments that he used on the ceiling.

Each day that he did paint, Michelangelo had to climb a forty-foot ladder to get to the scaffold, whose steps went another 20 feet. He would have to lug his paint, brushes, and plaster to the tops of the scaffolding. A recluse by nature, Michelangelo would rarely descend the ladder once he was at the top of the scaffolding. His lunch would be pulleyed up to him.

While popular belief states Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel exclusively on his back, most art historians believe that he painted both standing up and laying on his back. Nevertheless, looking up at a barrel-vaulted ceiling, and painting for an entire day, would be uncomfortable no matter how Michelangelo was positioned.

Payment
Michelangelo was paid 3,000 Ducats for the ceiling frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, but he had hoped for another 2,000 as a bonus upon the completion of the work. A ducat is a 24 karat gold coin, equivalent to a Florin, the standard currency in sixteenth-century Florence. The typical salary for an artist at this time was 100 to 200 Ducats per year. When Michelangelo did receive another 2,000 Ducats, his hopes were dashed to learn that this was an advance on the Tomb of Julius II. Michelangelo never received a bonus for the Sistine Chapel.

Tragedy of the Tomb
Michelangelo’s vast scheme for the Tomb of Pope Julius II was an impossible mission. The plan was to make the greatest tomb since ancient Roman emperors Hadrian and Augustus. Ninety wagon-loads of marble weighing 100 tons were plied in Saint Peter’s Square.

Michelangelo’s original drawings for the tomb included forty life-sized figures. However, on average, it took Michelangelo four years to complete one sculpture. Working at this rate, it would have taken Michelangelo 160 years to sculpt the Tomb of Pope Julius II! Although this work was never completed, a handful of pieces from the sculptural program remain, including Moses and the Dying Slave.