

Michelangelo. The drawings of a genius

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The Awakening of a New Age

Michelangelo was born into an era of profound upheaval and change. The invention of printing from movable type, the understanding of central perspective, the discovery of America, the first circumnavigation of the world and the resulting development of new sea and trade routes as well as the adoption of a heliocentric worldview expanded the spatial and intellectual horizons of the early modern age.

Michelangelo was also living in a time of religious warfare. Luther was fighting the Roman Catholic sale of indulgences and, not least, the same magnificent papacy that was Michelangelo's greatest patron. Italy's numerous city-states were competing enemies, and the country was fragmented, making it a pawn in the hands of the great European powers that were Spain, France, England and the Holy Roman Empire. Among the historic events that marked Michelangelo's mature adulthood were the Peasants' War (1525/26) and the sack of Rome by German mercenaries under Charles V (1527). As an artist he felt the immediate influence of several changes in the government in Florence between the Republic and aristocratic rulers.

An event with a far-reaching artistic effect on Michelangelo was the rediscovery of the greatest works of classical sculpture, including the excavation of the *Laocoön* group in Rome in 1506. The rediscovery of heathen antiquity as Humanism developed displaced the world view of the Middle Ages that was stiffly focused on the hereafter: "Man is the measure of all things," as the ancient Greek thinker Protagoras had said. The autonomy of the individual and his capacity for critical thought and creative power were formulated as central convictions of the Renaissance; the idea of the universal man was born.

This new self-image permitted artists like Michelangelo to adopt a self-confident posture in their dealings with mighty princes. While the art of the fifteenth century was still striving for verisimilitude and the imitation of nature, artists in the sixteenth century had greater creative freedom in taking nature as their model. North of the Alps the late-Gothic style still prevailed, but in Italy—and especially in Florence as the cradle of the early Renaissance and from 1500 onward in Rome as the center of the High Renaissance—the new style was oriented on classical antiquity.

It was in this intellectual climate that Michelangelo became a sculptor, painter, draftsman, and architect. The energy of the human body in his works is a testament to the genius of their creator. He replaced the delicate figures drawn in beautiful lines that were characteristic of the early Renaissance with a new, monumental ideal of the human body, full of heroic power and inner tension, thus shaping the development from the Italian Renaissance to Mannerism to the early Baroque period. For three hundred years his ideal of the human figure and his extremely wide diversity of postures served as an unparalleled model for the greatest artists, from Tintoretto to Rubens to Delacroix.

Nothing bears more eloquent witness to the art and times of the Renaissance than Michelangelo's unique drawings. The sixteenth century declared *disegno* to be the practical and theoretical foundation of all the arts—the intellectual father of architecture, sculpture, and painting. At the same time the drawing established its

status as an independent artwork that expressed the creative idea and the temperament of the artist. Michelangelo's contemporaries guarded his drawings like jewels, as they reflected the wide range and variety of ideas by this ingenious artist.

Michelangelo in Florence

Early Drawings

In their accounts of the artist's life, Ascanio Condivi and Giorgio Vasari report that Michelangelo showed a keen interest in drawing even as a boy. When his father sent the thirteen-year-old for an apprenticeship under the important Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio, the latter was immediately astounded by his pupil's exceptional talent. According to Vasari, Michelangelo once revised a drawing by Ghirlandaio, to the astonishment of everyone, by retracing the lines with stronger ink to demonstrate how they were supposed to run. The artist's early pen-and-ink drawings are unmistakably in keeping with Ghirlandaio's technique, which forms a rhythmical, decorative network of lines on the surface. Michelangelo's lines, on the other hand, are more regular and controlled, consisting of straight lines that create parallel levels and in many places are concentrated to produce dense cross-hatching. The position and function of each detail is clearly defined and sculpturally translatable. In the beginning, the artist liked to combine two different colors of ink, thus loosening the line-work and lending the composition a more colorful impression.

It was a common practice in the workshop training of apprentices for pupils to copy the works of great artists. Michelangelo is said to have copied various sheets by older masters in a faithful manner, before coloring, smearing, and smoking them to make them appear old. Among the earliest drawings of his youth are the three famous copies based on frescoes by Giotto and Masaccio, whom Michelangelo admired for their simplicity and coherent figural language. Following their example, he developed a new ideal of depicting the human figure, characterized by dignified greatness, heroic grandeur, and monumentality.

The Battle of Cascina

Since the twelfth century, Italy had been structured in independent city-states, which were struggling to maintain their position vis-à-vis one another and against the pretensions to power of the Papal States. Seven years after the fall of the Medici and the establishment of the Republic of Florence, the government commissioned a decorative program for its seat in the Palazzo della Signoria (Palazzo Vecchio). Florentine pride was to be celebrated in pictures documenting the greatest military victories in the city's history. In a kind of artistic contest, the young Michelangelo in 1504 faced the experienced artist Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1503 had started to paint *The Battle of Anghiari* (1440) against Milan, while Michelangelo depicted the dramatic events of July 28, 1364, in *The Battle of Cascina*.

Since 1362 Florence had been in a trade war with Pisa, which had sometimes gained the upper hand. Michelangelo followed the account of Filippo Villani, according to which the Florentine troops were bathing in the Arno River to escape the extreme summer heat. They were discovered by their enemies who caught them in a surprise attack, but thanks to their commander's perspicacity they won the day.

Michelangelo chose the moment between the surprise and the reaction of the soldiers, who rushed to arms. While Leonardo staged the dynamic clash of riders and soldiers in all its brutality and violence, Michelangelo structured his composition on three spatial levels and conceived the event as an “allegory of vigilance.” His contemporaries were immediately fascinated by his draft because of the expressive, richly varied postures and complex rotational movements of the bodies. The three-dimensional definition of the figures and the effort to make them space-encompassing was yet another achievement that had a lasting effect on subsequent generations of artists. Neither Leonardo nor Michelangelo completed their drafts, which are known only partially and in copies.

Michelangelo in Rome

Sistine Chapel

With the ascendance to the papacy of Julius II (1503), Michelangelo had secured his most important patron. Part of the new pope’s politics of power was to strengthen the Papal States and make them a Renaissance cultural stronghold, and to that end he employed Bramante and Raphael. In 1505 he summoned Michelangelo to Rome to build his papal tomb. As the construction of the new Saint Peter’s became an important priority for the pope, however, he asked the artist to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Disappointed at having to break off the tomb project, Michelangelo, who saw himself primarily as a sculptor, was initially reluctant to accept the new commission.

According to Michelangelo himself, he independently developed his complex program of scenes from the story of the Creation and the lives of the patriarchs Moses and Noah accompanied by the biblical prophets and the ancestors of Christ combined with figures from heathen mythology. It is likely, however, that he received advice from theologians at the papal court.

The paintings were executed in keeping with a horizontal illusionistic architectural system of arrangement, beginning with the central field of vaulting above the two adjoining fields with prophets and sibyls and continuing with the lunettes and the curved undersurfaces above them. With more than 300 figures charged with energy and characterized by highly expressive gestures and individual expressions, the artist created a universe of human emotions, at the same time bringing to life with dramatic intensity the theme of an almighty God and the consequences of the divine plan of salvation for humankind.

While Michelangelo is unique and highly versatile as an artist, at the same time his program is also typical of the thinking of his time. Inspired by Neoplatonism, his striving for perfection in creating an ideal human image is manifested in the content as well as in the stylistic execution.

The Tomb of Julius II

Pope Julius II was born as Giuliano della Rovere into a poor but respected aristocratic family. He is known as a power-loving, warrior pope and important patron of the arts. It was not unusual in his day for the goals of the head of the church to coincide with family territorial and societal ambitions and for personal interests to coincide with those of the state. Despite the high cost of his campaigns to retake Venice and protect the Papal States from the major European powers, Julius II was a

typical Renaissance ruler and thus a generous supporter of the arts. With Michelangelo's ceiling frescoes for the Sistine Chapel, the new Saint Peter's, Bramante's remodeling of the Vatican palace, and Raphael's cycle of frescoes for the Vatican apartments, Julius II commissioned extremely important artistic projects.

In 1505 he gave Michelangelo his first promising commission: to create a monumental personal tomb in the old Saint Peter's. It was to surpass every existing tomb in size, magnificence and richness of sculptural decoration, with more than 40 figures to glorify the pontiff's political and cultural achievements. The project was to be recorded in Michelangelo's artistic biography as the "tragedy of his life." The execution of the original plan was prevented by other papal commissions, and following the death of Julius II in February 1513, his heirs altered the design, rejecting the free-standing, walk-in mausoleum in favor of a still-impressive but significantly smaller wall tomb.

By the time it was finally erected in San Pietro in Vincoli (1532-45), rather than in Saint Peter's, six more contracts entailing changes had been negotiated. While the first draft provided for a program of classical sculpture, Christian motifs were predominant in the later designs. Nothing remains of Michelangelo's original idea but the descriptions of Vasari and Condivi. No later use was made of the famous sculptures of the *Slaves* in Paris and Florence.

Michelangelo and Sebastiano del Piombo

The Venetian painter Sebastiano Luciani (1485-1547, later known as Sebastiano del Piombo) came to Rome in 1511 under the patronage of the wealthy Sienese banker Agostino Chigi. There he soon became friends with Michelangelo, who took him under his wing. In Rome Raphael's painting was considered superior to that of Michelangelo; thus the latter joined forces with Sebastiano to compete against Raphael's position of supremacy. Michelangelo admired Sebastiano's coloration and made drafts for the paintings of his friend, who could not compete with the master with regard to heroic figural and compositional concepts. Their collaboration resulted in a fascinating combination of Michelangelo's *disegno* and sculptural, typically Florentine figural definition with Sebastiano's painterly, characteristically Venetian coloration. Even after his return to Florence, Michelangelo continued to send his friend drafts for paintings.

The preliminary drawings presented in this exhibition are all from the second decade of the sixteenth century, during which Sebastiano secured Michelangelo's help for almost every painting. In the mid-fifteen-thirties a controversy broke out between the two artists because of their conflicting opinions regarding the painting technique of *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, leading to a break in their friendship.

The Medici Family Tombs

The Medici Chapel

As a sculptor, architect and painter with many years in the service of the Medici, Michelangelo was simultaneously occupied with numerous projects in Rome and Florence. With the ascension to the papacy of Leo X in 1513, the influential family was now in charge of the Vatican as well. In 1519 Michelangelo received his largest commission to date: to design the Medici Chapel in San Lorenzo in Florence along with its sculptural program. Cardinal Giulio de' Medici and Pope Leo X commissioned

this large project for constructing tombs for the most important members of the Medici family: Lorenzo il Magnifico († 1492), who was Michelangelo's first patron and the father of Leo X, and Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano († 1478), as well as the dukes of Nemours († 1516) and Urbino († 1519), Lorenzo's son and grandson, respectively. Michelangelo based his architectural structure on Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy that was added as a counterpart to the Medici Chapel. He set new standards, however, with his completely new formal language. The three-dimensional architectural elements combine with the sculpture in harmonious unity. The allegories of *Day* and *Night*, *Morning* and *Evening* on the ducal tombs are a highlight of the sculptural program, symbolizing the limited time of life on earth and the transitoriness of the mortal body. The artist studied individual parts of the figures in several careful drawings in order to arrive finally at the uniquely sensual gestures and introverted spiritual expressiveness of his times of the day. Michelangelo's final move to Rome in 1534 as well as the death of the Medici pope at the time, Clemens VII, prevented him from ever completing this huge *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Leda and the Swan

During Michelangelo's stay in Ferrara in 1529, Duke Alfonso I d'Este presented his famous art collection to him and expressed his wish to receive a painting by the master. Upon this request, Michelangelo created a tempera painting of *Leda and the Swan* within a year. According to the Greek myth, Zeus admired Leda, the wife of King Tyndareus of Sparta, and seduced her in the guise of a swan, their encounter resulting in the birth of the twins Castor and Pollux as well as Helen and Clytemnestra. The duke sent an envoy to Florence, who, according to Vasari, made disparaging remarks about the painting. Enraged by this tactlessness, Michelangelo gave the painting as a gift to his pupil Antonio Mini, who took it with him on his journey to France in 1531, along with two boxes filled with drawings and cartoons by the master, in order to sell it to King Francis I. Mini, however, did not succeed in reaching Francis I. Later the painting of *Leda* made its way to Fontainebleau and was burned there a hundred years later because of its lascivious subject matter. It is Michelangelo's most erotic painting and was inspired either by a Roman sarcophagus relief or an antique cameo. By comparison with those classical models, the artist enhanced the sensuous aspect of the subject by having Leda willingly yield to the swan's lascivious urging. The engraving by Cornelis Bos shows that the original featured, in addition to the main group, a depiction of the two Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, as well as Helen as an embryo in an egg.

The painted copies in London's National Gallery and by Peter Paul Rubens are not based on the painting but on Michelangelo's cartoon, which Mini also took with him to France. On the now lost cartoon, the offspring of Jupiter and Leda are not depicted.

The preliminary drawing in the Casa Buonarroti for the head of Leda is one of Michelangelo's most beautiful head studies, executed in red chalk with the finest articulation. The same kind of style is revealed in the picturesquely detailed sheets *Samson and Delilah*, *Three Labors of Hercules*, and *Archers Shooting at a Herm*, which further convey a picture to us of the artist's style of drawing around 1530.

Presentation Drawings for Tommaso de' Cavalieri

At age 57 Michelangelo met the 17-year-old Roman nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri. He was immediately smitten by the youth's beauty, distinguished appearance, and intellect, and the meeting was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Michelangelo sent Tommaso, whom he called "a leading light of the century," sonnets, letters, and drawings in which he expressed his love. He promoted the young man's artistic interest and taught him how to draw. Tommaso acquired an outstanding collection of classical artworks and drawings and was later regarded as an excellent art expert. He supervised building projects of the Capitoline magistrate and supported Michelangelo's late artistic ventures, such as his wooden *modello* of the dome of Saint Peter's. The drawings that Michelangelo presented to Tommaso as gifts—*The Punishment of Tityus*, *The Rape of Ganymede*, *The Fall of Phaeton*, and *A Children's Bacchanal*—are executed in an extremely subtle, detailed, and accomplished manner, depicting classical, mythological subjects. The master also created drawings of "divine heads" (*teste divine*) for him, including that of Cleopatra, presented here. On New Year's Day in 1533, Tommaso expressed his gratitude to Michelangelo for two drawings, probably those of *Tityus* and *Ganymede*, which were apparently conceived as counterparts.

These presentation drawings have been considered professions of Michelangelo's love for Tommaso. The one of Tityus, who is fettered to a rock in Hades because of his love for Latona and exposed to the attacks of a vulture, brings to mind a sonnet dedicated to Tommaso, in which the artist said he was incapable of being happy unless tormented by lovesickness. And Ganymede, the favorite of the father of the gods, is by no means abducted against his will by the eagle; thus this drawing has been interpreted as an expression of the platonic, all-pervasive passion (E. Panofsky) that seized Michelangelo after he met Tommaso.

The Last Judgment

Following the peaceful pontificates of the Medici Pope Leo X (1513–1521) and the Utrecht-born Adrian VI (1522/23), another member of the Medici dynasty entered the Vatican as Pope Clement VII. His papacy was marked by the sack of Rome (1527) when the Medici were exiled from Florence, military defeat, and the advance of the Protestants. Nevertheless he was a generous patron of the arts, and Michelangelo's fresco *The Last Judgment* for the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel is the most important work commissioned during his papacy.

As he had done earlier with his ceiling frescoes, Michelangelo designed a dramatic depiction of human fate, interpreting the Last Judgment as a monumental apocalyptic vision of the thought of redemption and the terror of damnation. Demons are struggling for the souls of the damned, and the dead are awakened with blaring trumpets, while the redeemed gather around the figure of Christ, the mighty Judge of the World. Here again, Michelangelo combines the biblical narrative with scenes from ancient mythology. The connection with the *Inferno* from Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be seen at the bottom of the fresco in the figure of Charon, the ferryman carrying the dead to the underworld. In the dynamic postures and foreshortening of the figures reaching in all directions as well as in their sculptural quality and moving, powerful expressiveness we experience the master's visionary imagination in all its creative diversity.

During this period of crisis in the church and the resulting efforts to reform it, Michelangelo made the acquaintance of the Roman poetess Vittoria Colonna, under

whose influence he entered a phase of deep spirituality and religiosity in his artistry. In this spirit and as a reflection on his own mortality, Michelangelo created his late Crucifixion and Pietà scenes.

Projects for Fellow Artists

After the completion of the frescoes in the Cappella Paolina (1550), Michelangelo abandoned painting. From that time on he devoted himself to sculpture and focused intensively on great architectural projects, such as building the new Saint Peter's Basilica. He continued, however, to create drafts for paintings by fellow artists such as Marcello Venusti and Daniele da Volterra, who in their works preserved his inventions for posterity. While he provided a compositionally accomplished preliminary drawing (a so-called *cartonetto*) for Marcello Venusti's painting of the *Annunciation*, he gave Daniele smaller drafts. The master's four New York sketches are initial ideas for Daniele's picture of *David and Goliath* in the Louvre, showing the group from the front and the back, respectively. Daniele is said to have used a clay model for the depictions from two sides, yet rather than rendering the postures identically, he altered them, thus illustrating that painting, as compared to sculpture, has the opportunity of variations. The painting is an exceptional contribution to the *paragone*, the lively debate in the Renaissance about which art genre was superior: painting or sculpture. Daniele did not adopt the master's drafts mechanically; rather he independently developed them further or elaborated them in detailed individual studies.

Late Crucifixion Drawings

The three poignant depictions of the Crucifixion of Christ belong to a series of stylistically related drawings on the subject. They are frequently attributed to the artist's last creative period, although the exact date of their creation cannot be established with certainty. In these drawings Michelangelo focuses on the essential, omits decorative details, and reduces the figures to simple, block-like forms. Standing beneath the Cross are Saint John and the Mother of God. They are left entirely to their own devices in an empty space that dramatically reveals the hopelessness of their situation. They are either plainly venting their grief and desperation or recoiling in reaction to the icy-cold sensation that Christ's death on the Cross has evoked within them. Although the figural motifs of the individual drawings resemble one another, the reactions of the figures express varying and profound feelings of pain. The drawing in the British Museum appears to be the most conciliatory one: here, the Virgin Mary tenderly presses against the side of the Savior, who offers her solace and fills her with inner warmth. The Madonna and Saint John are confident that Christ's death on the cross signifies their salvation. Their hopes are reaffirmed by the figure of the Savior, whose body is imbued with a power from within that succeeds in freeing the two figures from their earthbound state and raises their expectation of salvation. The elementary human feelings common to all mankind that Michelangelo reflects in these depictions are unique in his oeuvre of drawings. They bear testimony to the deeply religious beliefs of Michelangelo, whose thoughts revolved around Christ's death and salvation toward the end of his life.