

Michelangelo (1475-1564)



The British Museum has almost ninety drawings by Michelangelo, one of the towering figures of the Italian renaissance whose artistic activities encompassed sculpture, painting, and architecture. Underlying his achievements in all these fields was a dedication to drawing: the perfection of the finished work achieved only after an exhaustive preparation of every aspect of the finished composition on paper. This manner of working, a constant in his seventy-year career, was central to the Florentine artistic tradition that Michelangelo learnt in the workshop of the painters Domenico and Davide Ghirlandaio. Michelangelo in turn passed this precept down to his pupils, as is shown by the exhortation directed to his pupil Antonio Mini written on one of the Museum's drawings: 'Draw, Antonio, draw, and don't waste time'.

Left: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Portrait of Andrea Quaratesi*, black chalk, around 1532

The Museum's collection of his drawings is unusually complete in its coverage of his stylistic development, with works from every decade from 1500 until the 1560s, and in having studies related to a number of his most important commissions: including the unfulfilled Battle of

Cascina fresco (1504-7); the Sistine chapel ceiling (1508-12) and Last Judgement frescoes (1536-41); and the Medici chapel in San Lorenzo, Florence (1520-34). It also includes highly finished presentation drawings in chalk intended as gifts for friends, such as the handsome Roman nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri or Michelangelo's confidante and fellow poet Vittoria Colonna; a portrait in black chalk of the youthful Andrea Quaratesi (the only surviving portrait by the artist); a design for silverware; a full-size cartoon of the Holy Family (on permanent display in Gallery 90) for a painting by his biographer Ascanio Condivi now in the Casa Buonarroti, Florence; and two of his intensely moving Crucifixion studies made right at the end of his life, probably for his own private devotion.

Born into the minor bourgeoisie Buonarroti family in Caprese, near Sansepolcro, Michelangelo underwent formal schooling until the age of 13 (a rarity among artists of his period). In 1488 he was apprenticed as a painter in the workshop of the leading Florentine painters of the day, the Ghirlandaio brothers, and the following year he joined a group of young sculptors training in the Medici gardens in San Marco. His precocious artistic talent was first revealed in his marble reliefs, the Battle of the Centaurs and the Donatello-inspired Madonna of the Stairs (both Casa Buonarroti, Florence) executed in his late teens, and slightly later in the Bacchus (Bargello, Florence) executed in Rome in 1496. Around the same period he painted the unfinished panel, the Virgin and Child with St John and Angels (known as the 'Manchester Madonna'), in the National Gallery, London. Michelangelo's artistic reputation was firmly established by the virtuoso marble Pietà (St Peter's, Rome) completed in 1500 for the tomb of a French Cardinal. While in Rome he also worked on the unfinished panel of the Entombment (c.1500-1) now in the National Gallery, London.

In 1501 Michelangelo returned to Florence where he remained until 1504, completing the gigantic marble David (Accademia, Florence), the sculpture of the Madonna and Child (Bruges, Notre Dame) and the circular painting of the Holy Family (the 'Doni Tondo', Uffizi, Florence). Unfulfilled commissions from this period, an oft-repeated pattern in Michelangelo's career, include 12 marble apostles for Florence cathedral of which only the unfinished Matthew resulted (Accademia, Florence); two circular marble roundels of the Virgin and Child (Bargello, Florence and Royal Academy, London); and the Battle of Cascina fresco for the Sala del Gran Consiglio in the Palazzo Vecchio. The latter

only progressed to a cartoon (a large-scale drawing), now destroyed, of the central section of the composition known as the Bathers for its depiction of nude Florentine soldiers struggling into their armour after a swim. The twisting, contorted poses of the figures (a large pen drawing for one of them is in the British Museum collection) were tremendously influential and are frequently cited in contemporary paintings and prints.

In 1505 Michelangelo was summoned to Rome by Pope Julius II who commissioned him to execute his tomb in St Peter's. The unrealistic ambition of Michelangelo's scheme, comprising over forty statues and numerous bronze reliefs, as well as the competing claims on the artist's time imposed on him by Julius and successive popes, meant that the project was doomed from the outset. What Michelangelo's sixteenth-century biographer Ascanio Condivi coined 'the tragedy of the tomb' finally concluded with the erection in 1545 of the severely scaled-down monument (whose most celebrated element is the Moses) in the Roman church of S. Pietro in Vincoli. In 1508 Pope Julius also commissioned Michelangelo to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a work completed by the end of 1512. A drawing in the Museum gives an idea of the initial very simple scheme consisting of Apostles in the spandrels and geometric ornamentation on the vault. This evolved into a far more complex arrangement of fictive stone architecture and a multitude of figures, some of which are dramatically foreshortened like the figure of Haman whose pose is studied in a drawing in the collection. Michelangelo's luminous red chalk studies for figures in the ceiling (like the Museum's celebrated Adam) are among the most sensuous representations of the male nude ever created. The scale and grandeur of the Sistine ceiling ushered in a new type of heroic painting, and it quickly became one of the canonical works of the renaissance; its fame spread by drawings and engravings made after it.

Although Michelangelo was not the solitary genius of popular myth, his assistants played little or no part in the creative process their input being largely confined to minor help in the execution of works. His great rival Raphael, by contrast, attracted some of the brightest young artists to work for him, and with brilliant managerial skill harnessed their talents to keep abreast of the swelling tide of papal and private commissions that flowed into his Roman studio. Michelangelo was temperamentally unsuited to such collaborative methods of working (one of the reasons that so many of his commissions were left unfulfilled), but he was on occasion ready to help less gifted artist friends by giving them compositional and figure studies. The earliest example of this practice is the drawings he supplied to the Venetian painter Sebastiano del Piombo in 1516 for two projects: the Flagellation of Christ fresco in the Borgherini chapel in S. Pietro in Montorio, Rome; and the Raising of Lazarus altarpiece for Narbonne cathedral (now National Gallery, London). The Museum has two studies for each of these projects. In the early 1530s he made a cartoon of Venus and Cupid, a slight pen-and-ink sketch for which is in the collection, for a painting by Pontormo, and in the 1550s he also supplied drawings to Daniele da Volterra and Condivi.

The death of Julius in 1513 provided fresh impetus to Michelangelo's work on his tomb, and over the next three years he sculpted the Moses and the two unfinished Slaves (both Louvre, Paris). The election of two Florentine popes, Leo X (1513-21) and Clement VII (1523-34), both members of the Medici family, resulted in Michelangelo's departure from Rome and return to Florence in 1516. He was to remain there for the next sixteen years working on various commissions related to the Medici family church of S. Lorenzo. Michelangelo began by winning the coveted commission for the façade of the church in 1516, but it never progressed beyond the design stage and was abandoned in 1520. Around the same period (1519-20) work began on the New Sacristy of S. Lorenzo (so-called because it was built as a pendant to Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy of the 1420s) built as a mausoleum for the newly deceased Medici dukes Lorenzo of Urbino and Giuliano of Nemours - the Capitani - , along with their fifteenth-century ancestors Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano - the Magnifici. Four drawings in the collection document the evolution of Michelangelo's ideas for the tombs, the earliest of which shows a four-sided free-standing monument. The interior and the Capitani wall-tombs, consisting of seated idealised representations of the deceased with reclining allegorical figures of the Times of Day, were largely completed before Michelangelo's departure for Rome in 1534. The Magnifici tomb was never built, the only surviving element from it is the unfinished marble of the Madonna and Child. While in Florence Michelangelo was also commissioned by Clement VII in 1523 to design at S. Lorenzo a public library, the Biblioteca Laurenziana, to house the library of his uncle Lorenzo the Magnificent. Two drawings in the Museum are related to the library's vestibule: a pen-and-ink elevation, and a study in the same medium of the doorway. While in Florence he sculpted the Risen Christ (1519-20) for the Roman church of S. Maria sopra Minerva, and the Victory (Palazzo

Vecchio, Florence) created in the first half of the 1520s probably for the tomb of Julius II, but left in his Florentine studio until his death.

In 1534 Michelangelo was called back to Rome by Clement VII who commissioned him shortly before his death to fresco the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. Clement's successor, Paul III, endorsed the idea and work commenced on the Last Judgment fresco in the autumn of 1536 and it was finished by the end of 1541. The Museum has an early compositional study in black chalk for the right-hand side of the composition, and four figure studies in the same medium. The fresco is profoundly different in spirit from the joyous physicality of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the darker and more introspective nature of the Last Judgement engendered by its theme of Redemption and Damnation, and also by the more pessimistic outlook of the sixty-year old artist and of the Catholic Church itself, still bruised by the Sack of Rome a decade or so earlier. The nudity of Michelangelo's figures was criticised by contemporary critics, most famously by the sometime pornographer Pietro Aretino, and in 1558 Pope Paul IV ordered Daniele da Volterra to paint draperies over offending parts of the fresco. The weighty, almost ponderous muscularity of Michelangelo's figures in the Last Judgement became even more exaggerated in his last fresco decoration in the Pauline Chapel in the Vatican (1542-5). The composition and narrative of the two frescoes, the Conversion of St Paul and the Crucifixion of St Peter, are highly formalised, the rhetorical gestures of the protagonists and the settings deliberately abstracted from reality. The deeply spiritual, almost visionary quality of Michelangelo's late painting style is also found in his celebrated series of Crucifixion studies (two of which are in the Museum), and in the two unfinished Pietà marbles sculpted in c.1547-55 (Museo del Opera del Duomo, Florence) and the Rondanini Pietà of c. 1552/3-64 (Castello, Sforzesco, Milan). In the last two decades of his life Michelangelo was also busy on architectural projects in Rome: designing the Piazza del Campidoglio and the Palazzo Farnese; he also became the chief architect to St Peter's in 1546.

Michelangelo died in Rome aged eighty-nine, his body was then smuggled to Florence and buried with elaborate honours in S. Croce. No other Italian of the renaissance period is better known to us: his broken-nosed countenance familiar from paintings, drawings, medals and busts (a good example of the latter by Daniele da Volterra is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford); numerous letters and the mythologizing biographies of Condivi (1553) and Vasari (1550 and 1564) providing much material to analyse his character. Michelangelo's influence was enormous even without a formal school to continue and promulgate his style, due in large part to the large number of reproductive engravings taken from his works (a good selection of these are in the Department). Copies after his work by artists as diverse as Sir Peter Paul Rubens and William Blake in the Museum's collection give some idea of his lasting influence. Michelangelo was perhaps the most brilliant draughtsman of the male nude ever to have lived, and it is perhaps this aspect of his work that had the most durable legacy as his idealised vision of the male form became enshrined in the academic art tradition throughout Europe well into the last century.

Works in Other UK Collections

London British Library (letters by Michelangelo)
National Gallery (two early paintings)
Royal Academy (Taddei Tondo marble)
Victoria and Albert (wax models)
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (large collection of drawings and a grisaille)
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (a drawing)
Royal collection, Windsor Castle (drawings)

Further Reading

The bibliography on Michelangelo is vast, and the following list is confined to works written in English on his drawings alone. For a good general bibliography see the entry on the artist in the Grove Dictionary of Art.

J. Wilde, Italian Drawings in the British Museum, *Michelangelo and His Studio*, British Museum Publications, 1953

J.A. Gere and N. Turner, *Drawings by Michelangelo from English Collections*, British Museum Publications, 1975

M. Hirst, *Michelangelo and his Drawings*, Yale, 1988

P. Joannides, *Michelangelo and His Influence: Drawings from Windsor Castle*, 1996