

Michelangelo: the last decades

Major new exhibition explores the art,
faith & friendships of the Renaissance
master's final years

2 May – 28 July 2024

Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery

Supported by:

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Images: <http://tinyurl.com/michelangelolastdecades>

LONDON, 26 February: A landmark new exhibition at the British Museum will explore the final three decades of the Renaissance master Michelangelo's illustrious life and career. *Michelangelo: the last decades* (2 May – 28 July 2024) will delve exclusively into this significant – and arguably most demanding – period of the artist's life, focusing on how his art and faith evolved through the common challenge of ageing in a rapidly changing world.

The monumental, over-two-metres-high *Epifania* (about 1550–53) will be displayed for the first time since its painstaking conservation which began back in 2018. The only complete surviving cartoon (a full-scale preparatory drawing, from the Italian word for a large sheet of paper) by Michelangelo, it is among the largest Renaissance works on paper, and one of the great treasures of the British Museum collection.

For the first time in over four centuries, *Michelangelo: the last decades* will reunite the *Epifania* with the painting made from it by Michelangelo's biographer, Ascanio Condivi. The work, loaned from Casa Buonarroti, Florence, is a fascinating example of how the elderly Michelangelo used his skill in drawing to create models for others to paint.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) left Florence for Rome in 1534, never to see his native city again. This move marked the beginning of a dramatic new chapter which would fundamentally shape his experiences as both an artist and as a man.

The popular perception of Michelangelo focuses on the famous works of his youth: the *David* (1501–04), for example, or the Sistine Chapel ceiling. *Michelangelo: the last decades* will introduce visitors to the remarkable variety and inventiveness of his late career, which saw him still working four days before his death in 1564, aged 88.

The exhibition will look at the way Michelangelo redefined the iconography of religious art to create hugely influential compositions of key moments in Christianity, such as the Crucifixion, the Lamentation and the Last Judgment, at a time when the Catholic church was being challenged as never before.

Numerous other works from the British Museum's unrivalled collection of Michelangelo drawings will also be shown for the first time in almost two decades, including preparatory drawings from the *Last Judgment*, which chart how Michelangelo invented a fresh vision of how the human form would be refashioned at the end of the world. Such was the boldness of his innovation that his painting was fiercely criticized and then censored.

Michelangelo: the last decades will also look beyond the artist to reveal his personality. Through a diverse array of his poems, letters and artistic designs, the exhibition will provide rare insights into the artist's engaging interaction with his innermost and most trusted circle.

Generous loans from the British Library include lively letters to his young nephew that show Michelangelo had an irritable side, easily sparked to annoyance. Meanwhile, poems and drawings directed to his aristocratic friends, Tommaso de' Cavalieri and the poet Vittoria Colonna, provide evidence of his passionate and deeply felt attachment to them. One exquisite work created as part of this correspondence, lent by His Majesty The King from the Royal Collection, is *The Punishment of Tityus* (about 1532) showing an eagle tearing out the liver of a bound naked man, gifted to Tommaso as moral guidance for the young man.

The intensity of Michelangelo's faith strengthened as he aged. On show will be one of the most moving examples of his meditation on Christ's death and his own mortality: a group of drawings of the Crucifixion, made during the last ten years of his life. Through them we witness an elderly artist turning to the act of drawing as a means of spiritual meditation – variations on a single theme to explore his feelings about mortality, sacrifice, faith, and the prospect of redemption.

Sarah Vowles, Curator of Italian & French Prints & Drawings comments: "When Michelangelo moved to Rome in 1534, he was almost sixty years old. This exhibition follows him through the next three decades, until his death at the age of almost 89, exploring the variety of works he produced – from the Last Judgment to the dome of St Peter's – and the ways in which he evolved his working practice in later life. It also introduces visitors to Michelangelo as a man, bound in a rich network of friendships, and brings his own voice to the fore – articulate, impassioned, often prickly, but never anything less than compelling."

Michelangelo: the last decades will run from 2 May – 28 July 2024 in the Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery at the British Museum.

Notes to Editors:

For more information, please visit the *Michelangelo: the last decades* exhibition webpage: britishmuseum.org/michelangelo

Funding for the conservation of the *Epifania* was generously provided through a grant from the Bank of America Art Conservation Project.

Open Saturday to Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 15 minutes before closing. Early bird tickets from £14, under-16s free when accompanied by a paying adult, 2-for-1 tickets for students on Fridays, and concessions and group rates available.

For families:

Explore what life was like in Michelangelo's Italy through a specially designed, creative family exhibition trail.

Tom is lost in time again and he needs to find Granny Bea! Luckily, she's left behind a list of objects she wants to see from Italy in the time of the artist Michelangelo. They can all be found inside the British Museum exhibition *Michelangelo: the last decades*. Can you help Tom locate these four objects and complete some fun art activities? Maybe then he'll find Granny Bea and they can travel back home together.

This self-led trail takes you on a journey of creativity and discovery. Exploring and creating art you will find out about what life was like in Michelangelo's Italy.

Art materials will be provided for you in the art pack to create your own creative responses as a family. The *Find Tom in Time* trail and art pack can be collected from the Families Desk in the Great Court. Please note a returnable £10 deposit is required to hire the art pack.

Families Desk opening times: Weekends and school holidays (term dates from London Borough of Camden): 10.00–12.30 and 13.15–16.30.

Publications:

To coincide with the exhibition, a beautifully illustrated catalogue, *Michelangelo: the last decades*, written by Sarah Vowles and Grant Lewis, will be published by the British Museum Press in May 2024. Hardback, £35, ISBN 9780714126982.

For young readers, *Find Tom in time: Michelangelo's Italy*, written and illustrated by Fatti Burke is published by Nosy Crow in collaboration with the British Museum. Reading age 6+, Paperback, £7.99, ISBN 9781839942167. Hardback, £12.99, ISBN 9781839942150.

For more information on the books please contact: Toni Allum tallum@britishmuseum.org



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