



Study for 'Adam': A chance to watch Michelangelo's mind at work

DRAWINGS OF A TITAN

ART

NEWSWEEK

H. L. Mencken once described the artist as "a sort of proof-reader, blue pencilling the bad spelling of God." With Michelangelo we have a proof-reader who all but discards the original script to create his own. His name conjures up the larger-than-life image of a Titan—"the divine Michelangelo," Vasari called him—rivaling God himself in the act of creation. His "David," the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the "Pietà," the "Last Judgment" are Art to us—something great and priceless that we humbly view from behind a velvet rope. Michelangelo was only a man, of course, but no artist ever surpassed him in hiding that fact from his public. Notoriously aloof and private about his personal life, a solitary worker in an era of crowded studio workshops, he shunned reality, preferring the higher realm of the imagined ideal.

An artist's drawings traditionally fall into two categories—finished sheets intended as self-sufficient artworks and working drawings conceived as studies for a piece in another medium, which can range from bare notations to elaborate figure studies. If, as Goethe said, architecture is frozen music, drawing, for a painter or sculptor, must be frozen thought, for only the stick of chalk intervenes between the mind and its groping formulations. Thus, an artist's drawings are highly revealing—which is no doubt why Michelangelo, the idealist, tried to burn up much of his lifetime's accumulation of them shortly before he died. Fortunately, a good number were saved, and you can now be nose to glass

with nearly 50 of them at an extraordinary exhibition called "Michelangelo and His World" at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

The centerpiece of the show, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and Philip Morris, Inc., is the loan of 41 drawings from the British Museum, mounted so that both sides of the many double-sided ones can be viewed. It's the largest group of Michelangelo drawings ever exhibited together in the Western Hemisphere and, as if that weren't enough,

the Morgan has borrowed others from nearby collections, including the justly famous Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Libyan Sibyl," and has put numerous drawings by contemporaries, related documents, personal letters, music, engravings and manuscripts on view as well.

For the visitor, the show is a little like having the chance to eavesdrop on Bach trying out some tunes for the B-Minor Mass on his harpsichord: you get to watch the great artist's mind at work, his changes, hesitations, flashes of insight. In his drawings, Michelangelo was a dreamer, lost in hectic reverie, fantasizing about a race of superhumans who personified profound pagan and Christian concepts. These sketches abound with restless movement as his forms muscle their way into existence. Unlike his predecessors, whose highly refined drawings he copied with such arrogant dispatch as a student during the last decade of the fifteenth century, Michelangelo soon lost interest in careful placement or fine finish—two of the salient features of "good" drawing.

RUGGED GRACE: It's important to keep in mind that only a few of the drawings in the show were meant for eyes other than the artist's own, but, even so, the supremely certain fluidity he achieved in his High Renaissance middle years is spectacular. It is impossible to imagine a match in the whole history of art for the rugged grace of his "Seated Nude Man" (a study for his legendary "Battle of Cascina" cartoon), with its exquisitely articulated torso. The long side of an abdomen is the most difficult section of the anatomy to enliven, even when muscle-bound, but Michelangelo makes it look easy. Equally superb are the fleeting figure studies on the "Nude's" verso, and the "Head of a Youth" which commands its page so powerfully with such economy of means. His marvelous humanity is such that he turns a grotesque head of a satyr into a metaphor for

'Head of a Youth' and sketch of a grotesque head: Saved from the flames



the perils of leading an unexamined life. Michelangelo's consistently high level of expressionist energy was rarely equaled before our own century, which is why modern artists as disparate as Cézanne and Pollock found it essential to copy him. Toward the end of his life, his youthful confidence in Neoplatonism began to give way—under the onslaught of such devastations as the sack of Rome in 1527. In his late drawings, broken contours and dissolving shapes expose the human condition with compelling poignancy, his Crucifixion drawings approaching the pathos we associate with Rembrandt.

SQUABBLING: The British Museum's drawings are discussed at length in a scholarly accompanying catalog (\$12.50 in paperback), compiled by J. A. Gere, the museum's Keeper of Prints and Drawings. It seems intended for art historians, but it won't give them much new meat to tear off the old bones of Michelangelo scholarship. Since most of the drawings are unsigned, scholarly squabbling has been going on over their attributions for ages. At times, Gere veers from the generally accepted attributions, but his arguments are rarely convincing. He questions Michelangelo's authorship of the study for "Adam," for instance, without suggesting what other genius of the day could conceivably have drawn it so masterfully; viewing it near its "sister," the "Libyan Sibyl," makes its authenticity patently obvious. Just as unconvincing is his attempt to establish that the portrait of a young man on the cover of the catalog, usually attributed to Bronzino, is by Michelangelo.

But these quibbles of connoisseurship needn't affect one's enjoyment of the show. Even in his roughest drawings, Michelangelo's definitive touch shines through the dense tangles of overlapping bodies, the smudges and the numerous pentimenti of past revisions. He was the first artist to make a virtue of unfinish, a hallmark characteristic of drawing ever since. In his architectural studies, the nervous rhythms he sets up cause the customarily neutral facade of a building to shimmer with light and life—an effect he achieves even in simple pen-and-ink sketches in which he declines the advantages of crosshatching, chalk shading, white highlights, or other modeling techniques.

SCULPTING ON PAPER: Since he saw himself as a sculptor, he thought in terms of concavities receding into darkness and protuberances catching the light, rather than in terms of planes that align themselves on a surface—the way a painter thinks. Thus, in his finest drawings he seems to sculpt the figure on the page as though the paper were marble and his pencil a chisel. Michelangelo's drawings are marvels of energy made manifest through the most elemental of artistic means. His lines are as alive now as when his electric mind discharged them on paper four centuries ago.

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