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## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Masterpieces on a Shopping List

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*Boston*

Michelangelo knew what drawings could do. He used them for a wider array of purposes than almost anyone, from the banal to the sublime, and in genres ranging from comic to religious. Despite their centrality to everything he did, he treated them roughly, writing drafts of letters and poems on them, folding them, and in some cases reworking the sheets so intensely that they almost come apart. Most shockingly, he burned great numbers of them, and casually instructed his assistants to do the same.





'Madonna and Child' (c. 1525). *COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON/ORGANIZED BY MUSCARELLE MUSEUM OF ART*

His own callousness is at odds with the preciousness conferred by time and by reputation, but it is worth keeping in mind the irony of viewing under glass what were sometimes everyday lists and accounts. He did lavish attention on particular sheets, both those on which he worked out his most complex ideas and those he gave as presents to beloved friends. The range of functions to which he put them is so great that any exhibition can only hope to provide a window into his aims. The selection currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, "Michelangelo, Sacred and Profane:

Masterpiece Drawings From the Casa Buonarroti," curated by John Spike, does just that.

The exhibit showcases the technical range of Michelangelo's work, and how the labels of "finished" and "unfinished" are misplaced with regard to his drawings. He incessantly reworked sheets, and moved on when his interest was sated.

The most stunning illustration is his study for a Madonna and Child (c. 1524) in which he applies an astonishing level of finish to the body of the Child, which in a twisting pose echoing that of the Sistine Ceiling nudes seems to rise in three dimensions from the otherwise flat page. In striking parallel to Michelangelo's unfinished sculptural works, there is a high degree of contrast between different parts of the sheet—the body of the Child, which is so highly finished that it is impossible to even detect the artist's hand—and the face and body of the Madonna, which is roughed out in the barest form of a sketch. Seeing the drawing in person, one is confronted with its fragility and physicality: The sheet comprises two pieces of paper, glued together with a strip that runs right through the center. Understanding the physical fragility of the sheets—and the sheer miracle of their survival—is one of the most compelling reasons to see an exhibition like this. These are not images but artifacts: Reproduction flattens them, and tends to erase the archaeology of the page, how it was constructed through crevices (the stylus marks) and relief (the build-up of ink and white heightening).

Examples such as the Madonna and Child provide insight into how Michelangelo's drawings became so famous in his own day that such literary figures as Pietro Aretino repeatedly beseeched him to send any piece of paper from his hand. This is a key moment in the history of art, when the artist's mark trumps subject matter—it was mastery itself that was desired. (Michelangelo never accommodated, prompting an angry reprisal on Aretino's part: He wrote an acid commentary on "The Last Judgement," calling it fit for a "public bathhouse, not a sacred chapel.") Our own cult of the celebrity artist grows out of this phenomenon.

Aretino may have been rebuffed, but as he claimed, certain "Gherardos and Tommasos" were showered with gifts. The Tommaso in question was Tommaso de' Cavlieri, a handsome young Roman nobleman to whom Michelangelo addressed several love poems and drawings. The exhibition includes one of these gifts, the head of a woman identified as Cleopatra (c. 1532-33), which like the Madonna and Child has passages so finely worked that any sign of the artist's hand has disappeared. The refinement and beauty of the Cleopatra becomes a foil for the swiftly drawn, almost grotesque head on its verso—perhaps an allegory of contrasts or an inside joke. Despite five centuries of

scholarly attention, the precise meaning of sheets such as this remains opaque. What is clear is that although Michelangelo is sometimes mocked for his muscular female nudes, he often focused on the nobility and strength of women.

The least expected facet of the exhibition is the inclusion of architectural drawings, which constitute half the show. The choice reflects the strengths of the Casa Buonarroti, which holds the world's largest collection of Michelangelo's architectural drawings. By virtue of their abstraction and the somewhat abstruse quality of representational conventions, architectural drawings are by nature less accessible, but if ever there were examples for the nonexpert public to appreciate, these are they. The exhibition balances a contextual presentation of one or two projects with a sense of the range of Michelangelo's architectural work.

Michelangelo the painter is ever present in his architectural drawings, both in his choice of materials such as red chalk, typical of painters, and in his ready use of brushwork to lay down the basic composition and the patterns of light and shade. The inclusion of several studies pertaining to Michelangelo's work at the church of San Lorenzo in Florence makes it possible to chart, in outline, his education as an architect. Through his unexecuted project for the facade, a little known study for the tombs of Medici popes Clement VII and Leo X, and studies for the Laurentian Library, Michelangelo transformed himself from a painter and sculptor into an architect. Unfortunately, the physical division of architectural and figurative studies in the exhibition space obscures the way in which these pursuits were in constant dialogue throughout Michelangelo's career.

Among the most striking of the architectural drawings on display is the study for the plan of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (1559-60), a sheet in which one can read the layers of overdrawing and erasure through which Michelangelo refined his design, transforming the sheet into a palimpsest of rejected ideas. Like his biomorphic fortification studies, also in the exhibition, his design for San Giovanni anticipates spatial and geometric ideas that would not be fully explored for centuries.

A few photographs are included on the labels, but still more might have provided a context for viewers unfamiliar with the original sites. The challenge for curators is not insubstantial: The works themselves are subtle, often faint, and require the utmost attention on the part of viewers. The dark walls and single room in which the works are shown contribute to a hushed, meditative atmosphere, which supplementary material such as digital displays might easily disrupt. Yet one wishes for more, and the impressive exhibition of Henri Labrouste now up at the Museum of Modern Art points

the way. There the curator Barry Bergdoll has discreetly integrated small display screens among the drawings, so that they supplement without competing. It is an example worth emulating for curators of architecture exhibitions and of drawings alike: The combination of a difficult medium and subject makes such contextual materials doubly necessary.

That said, the Michelangelo show is beautifully hung and intimate but not crowded. Drawn from the Casa Buonarroti and originating at the Muscarelle Museum of Art in Williamsburg, Va., it is a collaboration between two small museums and a big one that serves all institutions well.

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