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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The Frugal Genius

By **CAMMY BROTHERS**

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Williamsburg, Va.

Michelangelo was a notorious miser. He drew on every scrap he found around his studio, only on rare occasions beginning a drawing on a fresh sheet (typically when the sheet was intended for a patron's eyes). He drew incessantly, so that while the drawings that are most widely reproduced suggest absolute mastery and polish, they are not representative of the many more that show him in the often awkward or halting process of working out an idea.

The 12 drawings by Michelangelo on loan from the Casa Buonarroti in Florence and on view here in the Muscarelle Museum represent a rare opportunity to see Michelangelo in his workaday mode of production, jotting down visual ideas in a hurry alongside poetic verses or assorted notes. Typically, exhibitions of Renaissance drawings feature the most spectacular, most finished works the artists produced. This creates a lot of visual punch, but gives a distorted view of the artistic process—as if everything issuing from the hand of the artist was pure genius.

By contrast, the drawings on view at the Muscarelle give a more realistic view of all the stages involved in devising and executing an idea, and in the process they provide a number of insights into Michelangelo's way of working. For example, the exquisite material quality of Michelangelo's sculptures was no accident—the man was obsessed with marble. The show includes one of the many drawings he made for the "cavatori," or

MICHELANGELO: ANATOMY AS ARCHITECTURE

Muscarelle Museum of Art,
The College of William & Mary
Through April 11

'Study of Torso and Legs' (c. 1520) *CASA BUONARROTI, FLORENCE, ITALY*

quarrymen, indicating the size of the blocks to be quarried and the name of the person who excavated them. Another sheet shows how he took a sculptor's approach to paper, literally carving out the profile of the architectural detail he was designing. Other architects did this, but typically relied on careful measurements, a compass and a straightedge to create a precise template for the stonemasons. Michelangelo attacked the page with a knife. This sheet happens to be one in which he had already begun composing a love poem. Together the architectural profile and the poetic fragment point to two activities for which Michelangelo is less famous today but in which he was equally accomplished.

If any aspect of Michelangelo's output is undervalued, it is certainly his poetry. Though the artist's literary efforts are not the subject of "Michelangelo: Anatomy as Architecture," the show, curated by Aaron De Groft, includes several sheets with fragmentary poems, highlighting the way Michelangelo's mind worked along parallel tracks and how he saw no need to strictly separate his activities. Among the sheets is a draft of a sonnet to his love object Tommaso de' Cavalieri, a handsome young Roman nobleman. Modeled after Petrarch's sonnets but original in tone and diction, his poetry often includes artistic metaphors and vivid evocations of his emotional suffering.

Better known of course is Michelangelo's extraordinary mastery of the human figure. It essentially came from two sources, both highlighted in the show: direct dissection and analytical study of human musculature, and careful study of ancient sculpture. In both cases, he left a sparse record, giving cause for suspicion that in this, as in so many other cases, he edited his own files to hone the myth of the spontaneous nature of his genius. (He famously burned piles of his drawings at the end of his life, leaving a selective record.)

For example, the muscle studies in the show point to a missing link in Michelangelo's drawings of the human body. While texts document his rigorous studies of anatomy, no dissection drawings survive. Instead, these studies for the famous marble figures of the Night, Day, Dusk and Dawn in the New Sacristy at San Lorenzo in Florence suggest an

eye capable of penetrating the surface of a body to its musculature, but no further (in this way they are utterly different in their interests than Leonardo's cutaway and other dissection-related studies of the body, which show an interest in systems and interconnections). His energetic hatch marks in pen, highlighting the planes of the leg, anticipate his sculptural gestures, hewing into the marble block.

Michelangelo left an even scarcer record of his studies of ancient sculpture, but the show includes a rare example in the form of a fragmentary study of a statue of Venus. Live female models were hard to come by, and while Michelangelo has been unfairly accused of representing women as men with breasts, the sheet shows him attending to the particular contours of a woman's hips and bottom.

Another sheet provides a view of a little-noted aspect of Michelangelo's mind: his sense of humor. Featuring the profile of a lady with precipitously drooping breasts facing that of a bearded man emerging from a boar's head, the odd pairing makes for a comic effect. Lest we miss his bawdy intent, Michelangelo includes a sketch of a hand making the gesture known as "giving the fig"—slang for a particular female body part.

Michelangelo's drawings are paired with a room of engravings from the Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae (the "Mirror of Roman Magnificence," printed by Antonio Lafréry in the 1570s), a collection of images depicting ancient Roman ruins and sculpture. Another room is devoted to a speculative reconstruction of a bell tower project in Pietrasanta in which Michelangelo might have been involved. For those drawn by the lure of seeing the master's hand at work, this material will be of secondary interest. But the prints are instructive in illustrating the monumental Roman sculptures to which Michelangelo was responding. They also suggest the immediate sensation created by his projects, such as the Tomb of Julius II and the redesign of the Capitoline Hill, that were instantly memorialized in engravings. By contrast, the digital reconstruction video has a tenuous connection both to Michelangelo and to the themes of the show.

The ambition of the show's premise—to demonstrate a connection between Michelangelo's approach to the body and his understanding of architecture—is illustrated in the catalog if not fully by the drawings on view. This reflects in part the extraordinary demand for these drawings (there are contemporaneous shows in Rome and London) and the curatorial decision to work with only one collection.

But the advantage of seeing a show of Michelangelo's drawings in Williamsburg, as opposed to Rome or London, is clear—even on a "crowded" day, it is actually possible to

have the drawings to yourself. This doubles the intimacy of the experience—you can see the artist at work, as if peering over his shoulder.

Ms. Brothers, an associate professor at the University of Virginia, is the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).

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