How Michelangelo’s drawing transformed the landscape of European art

Conversations on the page

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MICHELANGELO
Divine draftsman and designer
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, until February 12.

On a piece of paper which is now in Berlin, a youngish Michelangelo started drawing and didn’t stop until he had filled the entire sheet with an assembly of figures. It is likely that he began with the profile of a young woman shown looking downward, perhaps a rare study of a female model. Her headdress is workaday and her expression unremarkable, even subdued, maybe a trace of the boredom that Christ in when posing for an artist. Michelangelo then drew a more idealized male profile a little further to the left, giving us a male counterpart to the female head, and thus the building blocks of several possible stories. The antique-looking, costume-like drapery on the female figure may have been added later, as the rest of the page got filled.

Next, probably, the child was drawn in, reclining and at the same time looking and reaching up to the female head. Michelangelo is now drawing from the imagination. The figure looks like a putto of the sort one finds in ancient sculpture, and also like a Christ Child. So now we have a woman, a man and a child, with an emphasis on the woman-child relationship. We are verging on familiar iconographic territory without quite getting there. The female head and the child one’s quite lock in to each other, much as the upraised hand and eyes of the child try to create thematic tension. It is as if Michelangelo was now asking the question, could this be a Virgin and Child? Or is it a Venus with a frisky Cupid? This is probably when he began drawing the putti in the upper left, figures easily recruited to fill the available space. Even as it comes into focus, the page remains open to multiple readings. The putti can be attending Venus and Cupid or they can be angels at a Nativity scene. The male profile is becoming increasingly drawn over, but even this obscured figure can be recuperated thematically as a St. Joseph who has been relegated to the background. Michelangelo now added parallel shading lines to surround the primary grouping and to set the putti/angels a little bit further into the distance. But the page was not finished. Directly in the centre, between the Venus/Virgin and the upturned face of the Cupid/Christ Child, he filled the remaining blank with yet another figure. Loosen your eyes and you will see the impish older sib with messed-up hair, tilting his head into the space. We can read him as interacting with the animated child or with the impassive female head, even as we recognize that his head is out of scale with the other figures on the sheet.

These blocks of several and multiple stories, with a piece of drawing, a space far from the real world but from the world of finished artistic products. Figures, here, don’t yet have names; they just have bodies and, sometimes, clothes. Blank intervals between the figures can indicate space or just blank paper. Figures on the same page can interact thematically or pose as graphic neighbours—or they can shift from one sort of relation to another.

This early scrawl sounds the themes of an adventure in drawing that Michelangelo would pursue for another sixty years, in the process transforming the landscape of European art. Many remarkable episodes in this adventure are now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in a once-in-a-lifetime show organized by Carmen Bambach. When he made this drawing, Michelangelo knew he was working in a new realm of art. Paper had come into common use only in the fourteenth century, and the first artists who used it did so sparingly. It was only towards the end of the fifteenth century, as Michelangelo was first learning his craft, that artists expanded the preparation phase of works of art drastically, producing drawings of different kinds, from doodles to figure studies from life, to composition studies, to worked up models that could be transferred to a painting. Within a generation, the basic categories and functions of drawings were set up for the next centuries. (The exhibition’s first room offers an excellent introduction to the kinds of drawing made in the workshop of Michelangelo’s first teacher, Domenico Ghirlandaio, a leader in this graphic expansion.)

The artistic imagination now had a corresponding material surface that did not participate in the formal, public formats of visual art. Drawings for the most part stayed in the studio. They received and relayed all kinds of information and ideas, much of which never made it into the finished product. Yet drawings weren’t just tools. Beyond serving to prepare finished works, drawings brought into being a new world of malleable figuration that became a model for art in its own right. Before long, the associative qualities of the “drawing condition” started to penetrate works of art in all media, encouraging an art that no longer respected existing subject matter, or that crossed the boundaries of established iconography in strikingly novel ways. A couple of decades after the drawing in Berlin was made, Michelangelo carved a statue that, to this day, hovers between the titles “Apollo” and “David.” It is possible that Michelangelo intended it to be one or the other, but it is also possible—and this is a new development—that it changed from one to the other. Either way, the early sources indicate a multiplicity of designations, many of them calling it an Apollo, at least one calling it a David, and one simply calling it Apollo. In fact, various drawings by Michelangelo, some of which are on view in this exhibition, bacchic themes and the motifs of a Christ Child can be found in one another. This boundary-crossing is something we find in other works by early-sixteenth-century artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Hieronymus Bosch, Giorgione, and Jacopino, Parmigianino, and many others.

The exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum is motivated by the laudable aim to present Michelangelo’s drawings in their manifold relationships. Lines are drawn out from these drawings towards paintings, sculptures, architecture and poetry, and often enough more than one of these relations is being activated on the same sheet. For this reason, the show, which has 130 drawings and several loans of sculptures, such as the “Apollo-David,” as well as works in painting, engraving, gems and carved crystals, is important to see in its entirety, not just because most visitors, even most experts, will not see these sheets again in their lifetimes, but also because they offer the clearest possible demarcation of how a relatively new medium became the basis for all the art in the process shifted the foundation of art.

In Michelangelo’s drawings, the contour line is the figure’s eloquence. Even as it tells you how the figure bears weight and moves in space, the line itself—rippling, swelling, turning—assumes a life of its own, a humming commentary on the readable action of the figures offered in a language that we are being invited to learn. The singing profile is something we find in Michelangelo’s most finished drawings as well as in his quickest sketches. He will attempt the entire “verse” of a figure’s profile in one go, and, if necessary, attempt it again and again on the same figure. This is in contrast to his followers, who tend to build up their contours with small, tentative strokes; it is the difference between a wall made of bricks and one carved out of living rock. Many Michelangelo scholars agree on the criterion of the elocut keeping, but this doesn’t prevent them from disagreeing over specific attributions. Two drawings in Düsseldorf recently attributed to Michelangelo are similarly denoted in this way. In this case, their authorship is assigned instead to Michelangelo’s pupil.
The Post is set behind closed doors: in a locked motel room, where classified documents are spread out on the bed and inspected like a patient; in the Secretary of Defense’s conservatory; in a private art studio, out the back of the house in which a confidential editorial meeting took place; and inside the family home of a media dynasty. Through doorways and windows we glimpse more closed doors, behind some we see covert journalistic activity, behind others we find the invidious insularity of some influence.

In another room that people rarely get to see, there are the printing presses. It’s 1971 and the machines are huge and oddly beautiful, like the inards of a mythical beast. Today, presses are digitized and miles away; but back then they were likely to be located in the same building as the journalists. When the story is up in the middle of the night to print stories about state secrets the rumbles of them makes the hacks’ desks shake. As Kay’s father was the publisher of the Washington Post, who passed the paper (naturally) on to his son-in-law, Kay’s husband Philip. When Philip committed suicide, Kay, more famously Katherine Graham, played by Meryl Streep (took) the role. Board men in suits outnumber and crowd her: speak for her and through her. She is acclimated to this, and learns on her trusted advisers. There will be a public offering of Washington Post shares to raise $3 million, but with a woman in charge, their value is “at risk.”

Kay is at ease hosting parties and having breakfast with her Editor, Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks). Ben, though apparently fond of Kay, is quick to defend his journalistic principles against any sort of interference. “Take your stick out of my eye, Katherine”. His charm has been weathered by experience (but, as this is Banks, glints of it remain); while Kay is still stuck in her womanly role of accommo- dating and pleasing. She is caught between serving her husband, the inventor, her close political friends and the truth. Streep draws by Michelangelo from Florence that depicts a leaning torso without a head, conventionally shown on stage and in the Met exhibition. The Louvre drawing becomes clear when it was an end in itself. The figure seems to float just above the copy, and yet as our gaze slows we notice that these feet are really proped on the trophy, and the figure as a whole, for all the suggestions of motion, doesn’t seem to want to leave the page. The limbs are instinct with dynamism yet they have come into a figure of hieroglyphic resolution: a chiasmus of opposing limbs aligning across the body, right arm and left leg forming a vertical and left arm and right leg a meander pattern. The hand and forearm that have been redrawn several times, each version recalibrating the relation between axial and circular movement. Up and down, forward and back are no longer either or decisions but are all potential energies radiating from the figure. The winding sheet, rather than simply being the final page, is as much a rejection of narrative logic, is presented to a new, halting role as a divinity cloth familiar from ancient Roman art. Gently encasing the figure, its billowing form is a figure of motion beyond such choices in his own works. He exploited the non-space of paper to draw figures that suspend the oppositions of statics and motion, of up and down, of plane and depth, of finished and sketched. A sheet in Winsor showing a resurrecting Christ may have begun as one of a series of preparatory drawings for a fresco, but it soon has mastered the uncomfortable facial expression of someone who would like to speak, but is holding the words back in their mouth, as if they were small unknown objects.

But events, closely mapping history, force Kay to assertion. Daniel Ellsberg (Matthew Rhys), a disillusioned military analyst, leaks parts of a classified report to the New York Times. These documents – known now as the Pentagon Papers – reveal the dodgy scaffold- ing of justification holding up the Vietnam War: rigged elections, four administrations of concealed intentions; in short, “they knew we couldn’t win and still sent them to die”. When they start to print those findings, Presi- dient Nixon’s Attorney General accuses the Times of violating the Espionage Act and a judge bans them from publishing further. Now a journalist from the Washington Post follows the breadcrumbs and tracks down his old colleague Ellsberg and the rest of the Papers. He picks them up and flies them back to Washington, in their own seat. A select few Post jour- nalists and members of the legal department gather at Ben’s house and peer into the box. Should the Post publish the Pentagon Papers? The journalists know they ought to, regardless of the risk. But Kay is in a difficult position. Her dear friend Robert McNamara (Bruce Greenwood), who served as Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968, commissioned an independent investigation and became the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company. There is something else that doesn’t sit right. While it is no secret that newspaper publishers and political heavyweights have long shared drinks, and more, on each others’ immaculate back lawns, The Post is specifically about a moment when the government tried to censor the media. Of course the complicating truth is that this relationship works both ways. Media moguls have been known to exert pressure on politicians, boosting or threatening incumbents. Following the Supreme Court ruling in 1971, Justice Hugo Black submitted the following opinion. It bears repeating:

In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the govern- ors. The Government’s power to censor the press was abridged so that the press would remain free and independent. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose and combat corruption as it exists among government officials. Earlier this month, the current President, con- cerned that NBC had misrepresented him, commented: “It’s frankly disgusting the press is able to write whatever it wants”. He threatens (or promises) to strengthen libel laws in America. Unimpressed by much of the fourth estate, the President leads the business, the business is the press and it disseminates his own news on Twitter.

Here, when Graham finally agrees to publish the Pentagon Papers, a reporter races with the lead article from Bradley’s house to the offices of the Washington Post. The sub-editor takes his pencil to it. He has been told he has half an hour. He hurries a bit. At the page 1, he writes out the first dozen words, a pleasing newsroom accuracy. The President may not know this, as newsrooms do often operate behind closed doors, but good journalists write whatever they want.