

How Michelangelo's drawing transformed the landscape of European art

Conversations on the page

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MICHELANGELO
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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 headress is workaday and her expression unremarkable, even subdued, maybe a trace of the boredom that sets 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 lead, 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 in.

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 don't 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 at 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 satyr 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 figures produce and inhabit a space of drawing, a space far from the real world but



Sketches of the Virgin, the Christ Child Reclining on a Cushion, and Other Sketches of Infants

also 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 jostle 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 con-

dition" 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 iconographies 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 into the other. Certainly 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 a *giovane*, a youth. In various drawings by Michelangelo, some of which are on view in this exhibition, bacchic themes and the motifs of Christ's Passion inform 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, Andrea Riccio, Jan Gossaert, Lucas Cranach, Rosso Fiorentino, 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, also contains spectacular loans of sculptures, such as the "Apollo-David", as well as works in painting, engraving, gems and carved crystals. It is important to try to see it, 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 demonstration of how a relatively new medium became the basis for all the media and in the process shifted the foundations of art.

In Michelangelo's drawings, the contour line is the figure's eloquence. Even as it tells you how the figure bears its 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 eloquent contour, but that doesn't prevent them from disagreeing over specific attributions. Two drawings in Düsseldorf recently attributed to Michelangelo are summarily demoted in this exhibition, where they are assigned instead to Michelangelo's pupil

Antonio Mini, though no other drawings of comparable quality have been successfully attributed to Mini. I do see a certain derivative paleness in these sheets, and yet there is a fundamental confidence in the rhythmic interlacing of the figures and a basic family resemblance to the red chalk sketches of these years (including some of their anatomical strangenesses), qualities we find in none of the followers. So either we have to invent a new pupil, better than all the rest, about whom we knew nothing until now, or we have to allow that Michelangelo was capable of second-order work, which retains the imprint of his best drawings but as if seen from a slight distance. Maybe there were more sheets like this among the many that he burned at the end of his life in an effort to shape his legacy.

Michelangelo liked to have conversations on the page, leaving sketches for his pupils and assistants to copy, with admonishing notes ("Draw Antonio draw, draw and don't waste time"), and then correcting their copies on his return to the studio. Occasionally, he will really work with an associate, as in a drawing for the Dead Christ in the Louvre, which used to be attributed to his colleague Sebastiano Veneziano (or del Piombo), but in more recent times, and in this show, is given to Michelangelo. I believe that the Louvre sheet shows us the two artists in conversation. It is based on a



Risen Christ

drawing by Michelangelo from Florence that depicts a leaning torso without a head, conveniently shown right next to the Louvre drawing in the Met exhibition. The Louvre drawing

copies this figure, developing it into a study for a Pietà. The Louvre copy builds up profiles by short, one might say myopic strokes, in the process reassigning part of the torso's contour to the adjoining arm, and also getting into a muddle where the torso profile meets the hip, leaving the figure with practically no buttock, an error unsatisfactorily corrected by a second contour. In those areas where the Louvre drawing no longer has the guidance of the Florence drawing, particularly in those swelling legs, my eyes see pure Sebastiano. But the conversation didn't end there. Sebastiano showed it to Michelangelo, who correctly diagnosed a problem with the right arm, which neither props the figure nor hangs from it. In the two free corners of the sheet, the master quickly sketched first one option, a firmly propped arm bent at the elbow, and then the other option, a hanging limb. You can practically hear his dry, Tuscan voice as he admonished Sebastiano to make a choice.

Michelangelo aimed to move beyond such choices in his own work. He exploited the non-space of paper to draw figures that suspend the oppositions of stasis and motion, of backward and forward, of up and down, of plane and depth, of finished and sketched. A sheet in Windsor showing a resurrecting Christ may have begun as one of a series of preparatory drawings for a fresco, but it soon

became clear that it was an end in itself. The figure seems at first to burst from the tomb, yet as our gaze slows we notice that these feet are really propping on the tomb, and the figure as a whole, for all the suggestion 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 at the top 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 thrown off the body according to narrative logic, is promoted to a new, haloing role as a divinity cloth familiar from ancient Roman art. Gently encasing the figure, its billowing form a figure of circulatory rather than sequential movement, the cloth offers a setting for the figure in place of the "background" that a finished picture would need to provide. The drawing suggests that nothing, as yet, exists in the world beyond this body now being released from the confines of the tomb. This new life promises to remake everything, but for now that everything remains blank paper.

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 invisible insidious force of social 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 innards 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 they start up in the middle of the night to print stories about state secrets the rumble of them makes the hacks' desks shake.

And all this belongs to Kay. 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 formally Katharine Graham, played by Meryl Streep) took the role. Board men in suits outnumber and crowd her; speak for her and through her. She is accustomed to this, and leans on her trusted advisers. There will be a public offering of *Washington Post* shares to raise \$3 million, but with a woman in charge, investors are "skittish".

Kay is more 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, Katharine". His charm has been weathered by experience (but, as this is Hanks, glints of it remain); while Kay is still stuck in her womanly role of accommodating and pleasing. She is caught between serving the interests of the board, the investors, her close political friends and the truth. Streep

DC confidential

Steven Spielberg on the freedom of the press

ROZALIND DINEEN

THE POST
Various cinemas

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 scaffolding of justification holding up the Vietnam War: rigged elections, four administrations of concealed intentions; in short, "they knew we couldn't win and still they sent boys to die". When they start to print these findings, President 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* journalists 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

and then concealed the report. She is also nervous that the banks will pull out of the public offering if the *Post* becomes embroiled in a legal battle against the Government. And how will the paper hold power to account if that paper is shut down and they all go to jail?

The *Post* was made very quickly (a year ago Steven Spielberg hadn't read the script) and, in many ways, this speed works to the film's advantage – there is a freshness about it, and nothing is over-worked. The question at the film's heart is answered before it is posed, yet it still feels vital: should we protect state security or free speech? With the vitality comes playfulness. There's the cute but cunning kid, for example, a Spielbergian staple, who increases the price of her homemade lemonade and silently makes a killing by selling it to all the journalists working in her dad's house. In other ways, the speed of the filmmaking is irritatingly visible. One particular scene of lengthy explanatory dialogue (bizarrely played over sleeping children) is miraculously saved by Streep and Alison Brie, who plays Kay's daughter. The script varies from daringly subtle to coarse. It was written on spec by Liz Hannah (with rewrites in ten weeks by Josh Singer) and it plays to two contemporary plot points: the freedom of the press and female empowerment.

Many of the scenes showing Kay as the only woman in a room of men are all the more striking for their visual simplicity. Less successful is the busy moment when Kay leaves the Supreme Court, having won against the Government, watched in awe by rows of silently inspired women. It's mawkish when it should be rousing. Graham went on to oversee the Watergate

investigations 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 politics, 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 governors. The Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. 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 deception in government.

Earlier this month, the current President, concerned 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 leapfrogs the whole business and disseminates his own news on Twitter.

Here, when Graham finally agrees to publish the Pentagon Papers, a reporter races with the lead article from Bradlee'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. With barely a glance at the page, he strikes 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 subs never let journalists write whatever they want.