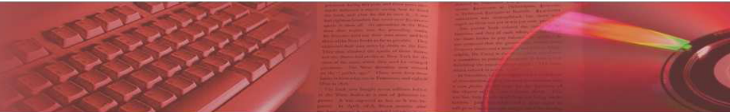
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pina Ragionieri. *Michelangelo: Drawings and Other Treasures from the Casa Buonarroti, Florence.* Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2001. 152 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-939802-94-4.

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A Familial Heritage and Responsibility: Michelangelo's Drawings in the Collection of the Casa Buonarroti in Florence

Although known for his extraordinarily difficult temperament, there was a surprisingly warm side to Michelangelo's personality when it came to dealing with members of his family. Frugal to a fault, Michelangelo actually worked and slept in the same pair of boots until they had to be cut off, and yet he was extremely generous to his father. Lodovico Buonarroti was strongly opposed to his son's choice of profession; nevertheless Michelangelo, the second of five sons, responded liberally to his father's demands for more money and was genuinely aggrieved when he died, a loss which is commemorated in a twenty-three stanza poem ("Ancor che 'l cor gi mi premesse tanto") written in 1531; it is among the longest he ever composed. He was also charitable towards his surviving brothers, setting them up in businesses that invariably failed. Among his siblings he was particularly close to Buonarroto and, after his death, Michelangelo supported his nephew and niece providing the latter with an ample dowry. He also provided them with a family home: the Casa Buonarroti.

In 1508, Michelangelo bought a series of three houses in Florence between the via Ghibellina and a street that now bears his name, the via Michelangelo Buonarroti. The artist lived in his newly acquired residence until 1525 when the demands of his architectural renovations on the San Lorenzo complex required him to move to that quarter of the city. In 1534, he left Florence for Rome permanently, but he never completely severed the ties with his family. The fortunes of the Buonarroti family continued to thrive, as recounted by Ragionieri in her catalog of selected objects from the Casa Buonarroti on loan to the High Museum of Atlanta. Ragionieri is the current director of the Casa Buonarroti, which opened officially as a museum and a foundation in 1858 upon the death of the last direct heir, Cosimo (b. 1790). The aim of this new study is to present Michelangelo's works within the context of his family's intellectual and creative accomplishments.

In 1575, the Casa Buonarroti had been inherited by Michelangelo's nephew, Leonardo, the son of Buonarroto, who was able to make substantial renovations to the property thanks to a fortuitous marriage to a member of the wealthy Ridolfi family. Leonardo went to Rome to steal the body of Michelangelo, which he brought back to Florence disguised as "merchandise"; he further financed the tomb dedicated to his uncle and constructed in Santa Croce (the Tuscan pantheon of great heroes). The Buonarroti family did not continue to rest on the laurels of their ancestor alone; later family members include scholars, playwrights and collectors, beginning with Michelangelo the Younger (1568-1647), the author of the plays *La Tancia* and *La Fiera*, the latter being virtually unproduceable due to its unwieldy length (an unprecedented twenty-five acts). A portrait of Michelangelo the Younger by Cristofano Allori (c. 1610, cat. 9) hangs adjacent to Bugiardini's portrait of Michelangelo in the Casa. Michelangelo the Younger gave the two canvases identical frames, "further demonstrating his desire to create a spiritual connection to his great ancestor" (p. 58). He oversaw the construction of the monumental rooms on the second floor dedicated to the glorification of his family. In addition, he commissioned many canvases from the leading Florentine artists of his day, such as Cecco Bravo, Carlo Maratta, Allori, and even a fresco from Artemisia Gentileschi, who was residing temporarily in Florence.

This passion for gathering and preserving the family heritage was continued by Filippo Buonarroti (1761-1837), who enriched the collection by acquiring Etruscan and Roman antiquities. But the greatest glory of the Casa Buonarroti is its treasure trove of Michelangelo memorabilia in the form of letters and drawings. These range in scale and importance from the small and amusingly personal drawing containing descriptions of

frugal repasts while quarrying stone with assistants at Pietrasanta ("Two rolls, a pitcher of wine, a herring; tortelli; a salad; four rolls, a pitcher of wine, a small quarter of rough wine, a plate of spinach, four anchovies, tortelli; six rolls, two fennel soups, a herring, a pitcher of wine," [p. 50, cat. 6]), to the hauntingly compelling, double-sheet "small cartoon" of the Madonna and Child that portrays a "maternity that is too painful for the mother to express her love for her son" (p. 52, cat. 7). Of the forty-seven works mentioned in Ragionieri's book, twenty-four are drawings by Michelangelo, a worthy but small fraction of the museum's collection, each illustrated by a full-page color reproduction.

The Casa Buonarroti boasts the largest collection of Michelangelo drawings in the world with over two hundred works on paper (in addition to two marble sculptures from his juvenilia). This represents a third of his incunabula output; the *Corpus dei Disegni di Michelangelo* 4 volumes (1975-1980) compiled by Charles de Tolnay (the first director of the Casa Buonarroti), lists a total of six hundred sheets. Some of these sheets are double-sided since paper was both scarce and expensive and Michelangelo was, by nature, parsimonious. In *Nude Seen from Behind* (cat. 5), a beautiful study for the lost *Battle of Cascina* (c. 1504-1505), Michelangelo re-used the paper twenty years later, at which time he noted payments for a cloak and a pair of shoes. Yet still, this is a remarkable number considering the fact that Michelangelo, according to Vasari (*Lives of the Artists*, 2nd ed. 1568), burned a "large number of drawings sketches and cartoons made by his own hand so that no one would see the labor he went through and the ways in which his genius made its attempt, in order not to appear anything but perfect" (p. 30).

The artist did not shy from telling others of the pains of creation. In a sonnet addressed to the humanist Giovanni di Pistoia, Michelangelo bitterly complains of the physical discomforts he experienced while painting the Sistine ceiling. In a marginal sketch to the right of the sonnet, the artist portrays himself bent "like a Syrian bow" as he reaches to paint a figure on the ceiling (cat. 31). The human figure is fairly representational compared with the caricature-like one he is painting overhead. Irving Lavin was the first to suggest that the sketch was intended to express Michelangelo's "sense of inadequacy." Ragionieri refers to the figure as a self-portrait, but, in fact, the little figure is featureless. One might wish here for a more detailed analysis of the parities between image and text.

A section of Ragionieri's book is devoted to drawings for the Sistine chapel. Remarkably, not one full-scale cartoon exists for any of the images considered to be among the most memorable in the history of Western art. A study for the nudes and cornice of the ceiling (cat. 32), however, reveals Michelangelo's typical creative process. In homage to antiquity, he spends his time articulating the muscles of the twisting torso, leaving incomplete the face and the lower portion of the legs; the same can be seen in the study for the *Expulsion from Paradise* (cat. 34). A *Study of an Arm* (cat. 35), a wonderful example of "drawing by sculpting" (p. 134), offers many striking similarities to the earlier marble David (c. 1501-1503). All of the studies demonstrate the artist's mastery of the human figure in movement and at rest.

A second major series of drawings is devoted to the plans for the San Lorenzo complex. The facade of the Church of San Lorenzo (begun 1421), which is Brunelleschi's masterpiece apart from the Cathedral dome, was left incomplete at the artist's death. It also happened to be the parochial church of the Medici family and the burial spot of its founders. Michelangelo was a ward of Lorenzo the Magnificent (to whom he dedicated his earliest sculptures) and grew up with his sons (including Giovanni, the future Pope Leo X). Upon his ascension to the papacy, Leo immediately set about rectifying the situation. The Medici were as attached to the preservation and enhancement of their dynasty as the Buonarroti were devoted to their own heritage. For Michelangelo, the work at San Lorenzo proved to be a protracted project that consumed much of his energy and took up a great deal of his time from 1516 to 1534. Michelangelo's plan to front the unfinished exterior with a facade resembling a secular palace failed mysteriously to materialize (cat. 19). More successful were his plans for the construction of the New Sacristy. A quick sketch of a pilaster for the Sacristy (cat. 22) amazingly morphs into the profile of a human face crying out at the base.

One of the most finished and tender studies (the one chosen as the cover illustration) is the head of Leda (cat. 8, c. 1530), a preliminary sketch for a now lost painting. This sensitive, red-chalk study of a bowed head drawn from life is reportedly a portrait of the artist's pupil, Antonio Mini. It has long been accepted that the majority of Michelangelo's figural studies are based on male models.

Taken as a group, these drawings demonstrate the full range of Michelangelo's skill, ranging from quick sketches (*primi pensieri*) to more polished final plans; they are executed in all media: pen and ink, pen and wash, charcoal, and both red and black chalk. The black

chalk drawings in particular exhibit a subtly variegated range of tones; no wonder this medium was preferred in the later works. Above all, this book reveals the artist's remarkable consistency as a draftsman. Questions of attribution, normally a focus for scholars, are remarked upon only briefly as these drawings have an impeccable provenance, having been either in the estate of the artist or part of a sizable donation by Grand Duke Cosimo II (1590-1621). Notes and scholarly arguments are kept to a minimum in keeping with the purpose of the work, which was written for a general museum readership. Interspersed between the individual entries are chapters that briefly sketch out the chronological details of Michelangelo's life. The book is attractively bound in a sepia color that echoes the color of some of the artist's finest drawings.

In an effort to control his reputation for posterity, Michelangelo cooperated with his pupil Asciano Condivi in writing an official biography of his life. Now with this fine catalog we learn how the Buonarroti family had a hand in preserving his towering legacy.

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