Why Shadows Are Crucial to Your Drawing

Rare U.S. Exhibition of Michelangelo Drawings

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An opportunity to view a Michelangelo firsthand comes all too infrequently for American art enthusiasts, with fewer than a dozen of his drawings and none of his paintings or sculptures held in this country’s permanent collections. An upcoming exhibition titled “Michelangelo: The Man and the Myth”—organized by the Casa Buonarroti, in Florence, in association with Syracuse University, in New York—will temporarily relieve this slight with a rare look at 14 of the artist’s original drawings displayed alongside his poetry and the work of his contemporaries.

Michelangelo helped perpetuate his enduring legacy as one of the great artistic geniuses not only through his prolific output but also through his determination to not let anything short of perfection survive. Vasari tells us that when Michelangelo was 89 and nearing death, he burned a large number of his drawings, sketches, and cartoons “so that no one should see the labors he endured and the ways he tested his genius.” This makes viewing the drawings in this exhibition an even rarer and more revealing experience—almost against the master’s wishes, we get a vicarious glance at the visions that inspired some of the greatest works of art the world has ever known.

The first section of the exhibition, “The Face of Michelangelo,” concentrates on the physical likeness of the master, featuring portraits by such artists as Leone Leoni (1509–1590), Marcello Venusti (ca. 1515–1579), and Giorgio Ghisi (ca. 1520–1582). With this section, viewers get another rare look at Michelangelo, as the artist was just as reticent to have his portrait painted as he was to reveal his creative process. “Michelangelo was not fond of portraying himself or of being portrayed by others,” says guest curator Dottoressa Pina Ragionieri, the director of the Casa Buonarroti, in
Florence. "In fact, Vasari reported that in his day there were but two painted portraits and a bronze relief of him in existence." Later, as a way of paying homage to Michelangelo, numerous artists used his facial features in multfigured paintings or wrote detailed descriptions of his physical appearance in published works.

The second half of "Michelangelo: The Man and the Myth" includes a selection of drawings from the Casa Buonarroti, home of the largest Michelangelo drawing collection in the world. Five of those drawings have never been exhibited in America and are rarely viewed in Europe, due to the need to protect them from light. Studies for the Head of Leda, often considered one of Michelangelo's most important drawings, will be exhibited, as will a lesser-known piece titled Sacrifice of Isaac. "In this drawing we get a sense of the artist finding his subject, the excitement and joy of the creative process as he works through the form," says co-curator Gary M. Radke, professor of fine arts at Syracuse University and an expert on Italian Renaissance art and architecture. "Ironically, this is precisely the side of Michelangelo he didn't want people to see."

We get to see even further into Michelangelo's mind through the exhibition of his own words. Poems, sonnets, and letters displayed next to his drawings paint an inner portrait of Michelangelo, the man who expressed through poignant description all the agony and ecstasy of artistic emotion. Ernst Steinmann, author of numerous books on the great master, wrote, "Michelangelo let the fire of his friendship express himself more willingly with his pen than with his brush or scalpel." Agrees Radke, "In many ways it is the works on paper in this exhibition—his handwriting, his words, his vision—that will provide the greatest glimpse into Michelangelo's soul."

"Michelangelo: The Man and the Myth" moves viewers to not only consider the incredible ingenuity of one of the greatest artists of all time but also to reflect upon the extraordinary life that inspired it. "In organizing this exhibition, I tried to create something like a biography of the master," Ragionieri says. "I think it's important to know the lives of the artist. Because, always, art comes from life." —AM