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## British Museum Shows Works Michelangelo Wanted to Hide



The British Museum

In a show of Michelangelo's drawings at the British Museum, an illuminated ceiling projects part of the Sistine Chapel.

By [ALAN RIDING](#)

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LONDON — The British Museum's acclaimed new show of Michelangelo drawings is an invitation to voyeurism, albeit not, as may be supposed, because of the Florentine master's undisguised worship of the naked male body. Rather, it is because Michelangelo never intended his drawings to be seen by eyes other than his own or those of his family and pupils.

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British Museum

Head of a woman

Shortly before his death in Rome in 1564 at 88, he ordered many of his drawings and other papers destroyed in two bonfires. The record shows that he also burned some drawings in 1518. And in between, surviving letters indicate, he chastised his father for permitting works on paper to be seen by outsiders and ignored a nobleman's repeated pleas to be allowed to buy a drawing.

Why such reticence?

Michelangelo believed sculpture to be the supreme art, followed by painting and architecture. And he proved his genius in all three art forms — with the marble masterpieces "Pietà" and "David," with the Sistine Chapel and with the dome of St. Peter's in Rome. In contrast, drawings served him merely as tools for preparing these and other monumental works.

He had two good reasons not to share these "notes," although it is not known which — if either — was the real motive for his secrecy: he may have wanted to hide evidence of the considerable effort that went into

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his art, or he may have feared that the revolutionary ideas in his drawings would be plagiarized. Certainly, Michelangelo was determined to preserve his aura.

In that sense, then, "Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master," which runs here through June 25, achieves what the artist apparently hoped to avoid: by displaying 90 of the 600 or so surviving sheets of drawings and sketches, the show provides remarkable insight into the way he worked over a career lasting more than six decades.

"I wanted to tell his life through his drawings," said Hugo Chapman, the British Museum's curator for Italian drawings before 1800, who organized this show.

To this end, the British Museum has united its Michelangelo drawings with those of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford and the Teylers Museum in Haarlem, the Netherlands, where the exhibition was first presented. The show does not include works from the Queen's Collection or the Courtauld Institute of Art, however, because, Mr. Chapman noted, its purpose was not to recreate the last major Michelangelo drawings exhibition here in 1975.

Instead, it links the drawings both to the artist's sculptures, painting and architectural designs and to his life, spent almost entirely between Florence and Rome. Thus they are accompanied not only by explanatory texts and examples of his poetry, but also by an overhead screen displaying close-ups of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and interactive screens indicating where specific drawings fit into the frescoes of the chapel.

The results have won near-unanimous praise from British art critics, with only Richard Dormant recalling in The Daily Telegraph that some Renaissance experts still question whether as many as 600 or so drawings can in fact be attributed to Michelangelo. Other critics, though, have hailed the show as, in the words of Charles Derwent in The Independent on Sunday, "unmissable."

Writing in The Financial Times, Jackie Wullschlager went still further: "For me, the show makes the artist known even during his lifetime as 'the divine Michelangelo' poignantly, achingly, deeply human in all his brilliance, passion, doubt and terror, for the first time."

Michelangelo, it seems, never questioned the importance of "disegno," the Italian word for both drawing and design, itself a central feature of Florentine art after paper became easily available in the 15th century. One drawing from the 1520's carries his instruction to a pupil: "Draw Antonio, draw Antonio, draw and don't waste time." After seeing a work by Titian, he is also said to have lamented that Venetians never learned to draw.

The exhibition is presented chronologically and, while no studies for "Pietà" or "David" have been found, surviving sketches for "Bathers," Michelangelo's unfinished fresco of "The Battle of Cascina," immediately illustrate his fascination with the male torso. With black chalk and white lead capturing the beauty and tension of twisting bodies, the effect is almost three-dimensional, as if even here Michelangelo were seeking out sculptural forms.

With the preparatory drawings for the Sistine Chapel, the sequence goes from simple sketches in which he tests various poses to the stunning "Study of Adam," the great naked figure holding out his hand to be touched by the finger of God in the chapel ceiling's central panel, "Creation of Adam." And all around, there are further sketches of knees, elbows, shoulders, hands and eyes.

"I have finished the chapel I have been painting, the Pope is very well satisfied," the artist wrote to his father in 1512.

But he would return to it more than two decades later to paint "The Last Judgment." And here again, many studies have survived of the figures swirling across this giant fresco. Interestingly, only men are naked; and on the rare occasions when Michelangelo portrayed women, their muscularity — and the often bizarre "attachment" of breasts — suggests that

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he probably used men as models.

Still, this show does not dwell on Michelangelo's sexuality and includes only one of the drawings that he dedicated to Tommaso de' Cavalieri, the young nobleman who was the object of his midlife infatuation. This work, "The Fall of Phaeton," which depicts Phaeton falling to his death from a chariot, is thought to illustrate the destructive power of love.

More striking, perhaps, is the passion of Michelangelo's late religious drawings. In "The Lamentation," where Christ's inert body lies in his mother's arms, Mary looks away sadly while other anxious figures crowd around her. Then, climaxing the show, are three drawings of the Crucifixion. Beside them hangs the text of a sonnet in which the artist contemplates his own life and death with these closing words: "Neither painting nor sculpture can any longer quieten/ my soul."

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