Reviews

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'Michelangelo: The Last Decades', The British Museum, London, 2 May–28 July 2024. Catalogue: Sarah Vowles and Grant Lewis, British Museum Press, London, 2024, 256 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780714126982, £35.00.

Esme Garlake

Monographic exhibitions of art history's 'giants' are feeling the strain.[1] Is it desirable – or even possible – to find new ways of engaging with major European artists who have been studied for centuries? Perhaps it is enough to display their works to new audiences, and hope that they continue to hold an appeal? In the British Museum's latest exhibition, 'Michelangelo: The Last Decades', one senses this curatorial predicament. Taking place in the museum's smaller temporary exhibition gallery, The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery, it has been nearly twenty years since the British Museum last held an exhibition dedicated to Michelangelo ('Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master', curated in 2006 by Hugo Chapman). This time around, the curators Sarah Vowles and Grant Lewis have introduced parameters not through medium, but through chronology: the exhibition sets out to trace the last thirty years of Michelangelo's life and works (from around 1534 until his death in 1564). In a similar vein to Chapman, Vowles and Lewis hope to bring audiences closer to the artist's 'personal passions and anxieties'.[2]

The opening room displays a portrait on paper of an aged Michelangelo drawn by Daniele da Volterra (made between 1550–55). In many ways, it is the perfect work to begin with: the artist cocks his head over his shoulder and gazes knowingly at Volterra, in an intimate moment that epitomises the threads of human connection that run through the show. However, the emotional intensity of this work on paper is immediately diluted by the large screen of 'paper' projected on the wall above, onto which Michelangelo's ghostly handwriting from a letter is scrawled, accompanied by a gruff voiceover: 'Here I am known simply as Michelangelo Buonarroti'. There is a sense that the curators did not quite trust the work on paper alone to engage visitors. The second room presents a range of exquisite studies made for *The Last Judgement* fresco in the Sistine Chapel (1535–1541), and drawings for Michelangelo's close friend (and possible lover) Tommaso de' Cavalieri. One sheet contains studies of tangled bodies, tumbling in clumps of muscle, while another depicts Phaeton falling from the sky among his panicked, contorted horses. But this space challenges viewers for the wrong reason: it is almost impossible to keep one's eyes away from the wall filled with a moving colour projection of the fresco. It is not for lack of drama and vitality in Michelangelo's paper

studies – they simply cannot compete with a moving, large-scale colour equivalent.

Fortunately, the exhibition's technological experiments are restricted to the first two rooms (apart from one voiceover that creeps out of the wall, rather effectively, next to one of Michelangelo's more amusing letters to his nephew, Leonardo). The exhibition's strongest moments come when the materials – and the stories behind them – are trusted. A line of letters, drawings and sonnets – with Michelangelo's *Christ on the Cross* (1538–41) at its centre – exchanged between Vittoria Colonna and the artist builds a powerful portrait of a spiritual and intellectual connection between two people. One can explore the key facets of the *spirituali,* an elite group of religious reformers in which Michelangelo was closely involved, without necessarily requiring this knowledge to enjoy the intimacy of the works and letters. Similarly, in the exhibition's most poignant moment, a darkened circular room displays drawings made by Michelangelo in his final days. There is space to contemplate the frail, trembling lines of the Virgin and Child (1560–63), in which the infant tenderly nuzzles into His mother's neck, or the repetitively, almost obsessively, traced figure of the Virgin mourning under a Crucifixion scene (1555–63), so densely worked in lead white paint and black chalk that she appears as a faceless apparition. It is here that the exhibition most explicitly emphasises Michelangelo's old age by drawing attention to how these works make visible the artist's physical, bodily state.

It is clear that this exhibition hopes to appeal in its intimacy: Michelangelo the human being, rather than the divine genius. It is telling that it is only in the exhibition's final space, 'Michelangelo's legacy', that visitors encounter an open page of Vasari's *Lives* (1550), alongside a portrait bust by Daniele da Volterra made shortly after Michelangelo's death. His humanity – that is, Michelangelo 'as an artist and as a man' – is also made visible through the variety of paintings by Michelangelo's workshop, collaborators and associates, which works well to counteract that notoriously powerful narrative of the 'lone genius' (particularly dominant when it comes to the Italian Renaissance).[3] Perhaps it is inevitable that an exhibition primarily presenting works on paper will feel more intimate, but the opening rooms offer a warning that sometimes the humanity behind an artist can be overemphasised, often through unhelpful – albeit enthusiastic – technological interventions.

Although this exhibition shows a desire to learn more about Michelangelo, it also reflects a wider curatorial trend to humanise the big names of art history as a way of ensuring their relevance today. This emerges most explicitly when an exhibition is structured around a particular stage of an artist's life. 'Michelangelo: The Last Decades' finds its counterpart in the Ashmolean Museum's 'Young Rembrandt' from 2020, which presented a hopeful narrative arc 'from insecure teenager to the greatest Dutch painter of all time'.[4] Whether youthful angst, or frustration with the physical and existential challenges of old age, it is surely not a coincidence that curators are addressing the theme of age at a time when anxieties about generational divisions are increasingly pronounced.

It is fast becoming a cliché to say that people today are searching for human connection. As a curatorial approach, emphasising the lived experiences, challenges and emotions of an artist can give audiences an opportunity to engage – and possibly even

identify with – a famous figure that they may have previously considered unreachable or inaccessible. But the freshness of this approach is nearing its expiry date. To take it further requires looking beyond the individual artist as a human to uncover the social and imaginative realities of that artist's historical world (an effective example of this could be 'Titian's Vision of Women: Beauty – Love – Poetry', on display in 2021 at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and in 2022 at Palazzo Reale, Milan). It necessitates a loosening of the monographic exhibition, moving beyond the individual and towards an exploration of entangled social, political and cultural networks. At its most powerful, it might spark an audience's curiosity about both historical and contemporary equivalents. One might think of the controversy sparked by Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement,* bound up in the fraught context of the Counter-Reformation and reflecting a clash between ideological creative expression and restrictive institutional expectations. This exhibition itself contains traces of encounters between works of art and the institutions behind them: the largest surviving *cartone* from the Italian Renaissance, *Epifania* (1550–53), displayed in the exhibition, was recently conserved in a project funded by the Bank of America – a bank which ranks third on the 2023 list of worst fossil fuel funders.[5]

Perhaps, as the lack of humanity of arts institutions comes under more scrutiny, curators and audiences alike are increasingly interested in seeking out the humanity of art history's 'giants' – an approach that seems to be working, at least for now.[6]

1 I note that Neil MacGregor's and Marjan Scharloo's foreword in *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master* exhibition catalogue opens with the statement: 'Michelangelo is a giant'/ See Hugo Chapman, *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master* (London: British Museum Press, 2005), 5.

2 *Michelangelo: The Last Decades*, The British Museum, London, 2 May – 28 July 2024, https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/michelangelo-last-decades (accessed 30 July 2024)

3 Ibid.

4 *Young Rembrandt*, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 10 August – 1 November 2020, https://www.ashmolean.org/youngrembrandt (accessed 30 July 2024)

5 'Banks financed fossil fuels by $6.9 trillion dollars since the Paris Agreement; $705 billion provided in 2023 alone; JP Morgan Chase, Mizuho, and Bank of America are worst 3 funders,' Rainforest Action Network, May 12, 2024, https://www.ran.org/press-releases/bocc2024/. See also Damien Gale, 'Banks have given almost $7tn to fossil fuel firms since Paris deal, report reveals,' *The Guardian*, May 13, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/may/13/banks-almost-7tn-fossil-fuel-firms-paris-deal-report (accessed 30 July 2024)

6 Charlotte McLaughlin, 'British Museum shuts doors to visitors early after protest,' *The Independent*, March 24, 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/london-palestine-palestine-solidarity-campaign-metropolitan-police-israel-b2517878.html (accessed 30 July 2024)

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'Weaving Abstraction in Ancient and Modern Art', The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 4 March–16 June 2024. Catalogue: Iria Candela and Joanne Pillsbury, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2024, 48 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781588397799, $14.95.

Marina Seyffert

It would be easy to compare the two rooms of 'Weaving Abstraction in Ancient and Modern Art' based on historical context, provenance, or respective cultural significance. The layout of the exhibition certainly suggests such frameworks. There are entrances to the