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Michelangelo drawings: closer to the master [Review]

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Hugo Chapman. *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master*

Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master by Hugo Chapman

Review by: Patricia Emison

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Hugo Chapman. *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master*.

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The British Museum exhibition catalogue of 1975 by J. A. Gere and Nicholas Turner commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of Michelangelo's birth remains a useful resource. Hugo Chapman's current exhibition catalogue benefits both from that memorable ancestor and from the heritage of a truly distinguished succession of British connoisseurs of Italian drawings, past and present. It is, however, no mere reprise, but a reinvention of the exhibition catalogue as monograph. The checklist of drawings at the end is intended to be used in conjunction with catalogues of the three collections involved: the Ashmolean (Paul Joannides is working on a catalogue of the Michelangelo drawings there) and the Teyler Museums, as well as the British Museum.

The present project accomplishes much more than bringing up to date the scholarship on Michelangelo drawings, which has seen considerable progress in thirty years, more than one would have had any right to hope for. Tolnay's four-volume corpus of drawings, with its generous attributions, represents one side of the pendulum swing (1975-80), Alexander Perrig's skeptical volume of 1991 the other. One might have anticipated that a volume on Michelangelo drawings would be given over to settling the score on these issues, as well as analysis of the six Michelangelo drawings which were unknown to Tolnay. Instead, the drawings are fully integrated into a biographical account of Michelangelo's career. They are beautifully discussed in themselves and issues of attribution are sensibly dealt with.

We are given, however, much more: this is, quite simply, the best available volume on Michelangelo (and the competition is fairly fierce). As in the adage *ex ungue leonem*, from the drawings follows Michelangelo's entire artistic career. It is

not even a case of the drawings being presented as primary evidence and the rest as supplement; rather, the drawings fit into a seamless whole which is Michelangelo's life and work. If Vasari had had the wit and the freedom from Medici supervision, this is what his *Life* might have looked like, plus the valuable study of later collecting (supplementing the fascinating vein opened by Antony Griffiths, ed., *Landmarks in Print Collecting, Connoisseurs and Donors at the British Museum since 1753*, 1996). Chapman explains both the historical context and the drawings in gripping detail. Supplementary illustrations from many artists and many mediums accompany the text. Despite the somewhat cloying subtitle, the obvious is left unsaid, and Michelangelo's works are left to speak for themselves as far as quality. Here we have Michelangelo without Neoplatonism, without Freudianism, but surrounded by real and difficult people, grappling with problems both personal and political: Michelangelo as a working artist rather than as a legend from birth. All students of Michelangelo will now start here. As for those whose interests are not primarily art historical, Michelangelo is a sufficiently well-documented individual, near the centers of power of a tumultuous and formative period and yet also in personal contact with both workmen and his dull bourgeois relatives, that he would be of purely historical interest if there were no art at all.

For those whose interests are primarily art historical, it is refreshing in the extreme to read a commentary on the life and work in which the effects of the hardness of a particular chalk can be "surprising, even shocking" (243), in which one is directed to theologically significant details such as the "angelic strangler" in a study for the *Last Judgment* (236), and introduced to a Michelangelo as teacher who can be alternately paranoid and jealous, or, as teased out from complicated sheets of sketches, "more endearing" (195). The poetry is not discussed at length, but tantalizing aperçus are slipped in here and there. Michelangelo's sexuality is discussed when relevant to the subject matter, but mercifully it does not become an obsession in itself. In general, an admirably balanced picture of the artist is composed: the text brings us up-to-date with the scholarly literature without enmeshing the reader in arcane disputes; it portrays Michelangelo as tough and capable, quick and disdainful of repetition, equally at home with the ideal and the grotesque, popes and peasants, as beset with difficulties and cranky, as eccentric, yet of his time and quite human.

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