

Fast-food Michelangelo

Review of the exhibition:

Michelangelo und die Folgen (Michelangelo and Beyond)

15.09.2023–14.01.2024

Michelangelo's art has ever since had a huge impact in popular culture and copyists were always around to make profit with his designs. Indeed, not just the cities of Rome and Florence live very well from selling out Michelangelo articles and souvenirs, like Vienna's shops and museums live from selling Klimt or Schiele cups and umbrellas 24/7. You can find everything you can imagine from a cooking apron with David's upper body and genitals to a dinosaur version of the Creation of Adam. Even the best scholar on Michelangelo Leo Steinberg always underlined that he collected such items. Considering that H&M sold jumpers with the same prominent fingers on it some years ago we must be thinking about why Michelangelo still attracts us. What touches us when we study his figures? Where does this gesture come from? Why don't they touch each other's finger? What about the touch in Michelangelo's art anyway? Did the Albertina in Vienna think about that or more when making their new exhibition "Michelangelo and Beyond"?¹

The collection of original drawings stored in the Albertina cover Michelangelo's entire oeuvre. From his over-structured beginnings in the environment of Domenico Ghirlandaio's workshop under the strong influence of prints of the later Quattrocento to his late dissolved red chalk studies of the Crucified expressing deep spirituality. In between, the sculptural studies show a panorama of human expression and movement. There anatomy is never depicted for the sake of anatomy. Michelangelo's figures incorporate a chain reaction of one muscular movement to the next. This organic, living overall movement, also called *vivacità* after Michelangelo's biographer and admirer of his *disegno* Giorgio Vasari, still fascinates us – like generations of artists after him.

When having that huge collection of Michelangelo drawings, it's always a good idea to show it. We still remember 2004's "The Era of Michelangelo"², and 2011's "Michelangelo – Drawings of a Genius"³. It's good to see them again. But how and at which cost? The insights and depth, especially that of the 2011

¹ Find information here: <https://www.albertina.at/en/exhibitions/michelangelo-and-beyond/>

All photos here are made in the exhibition by the author.

² Here you find the catalogue of the exhibition: <https://www.albertina.at/forschung/zeichnung-druckgrafik/publikationen/the-era-of-michelangelo-masterpieces-from-the-albertina/>

³ Here you find the catalogue of the exhibition: <https://www.albertina.at/forschung/zeichnung-druckgrafik/publikationen/michelangelo-zeichnungen-eines-genies/>. This publication is very scholarly and in detail. Lots of the catalogue texts from here are also featured in the fabulous online catalogue.

exhibition, have faded. Beside some sculptures from the Liechtenstein collection, works from other museums are hardly to be seen. Attempts were only made to exploit works from the museum's own collection.

When visitors enter the first rooms, everything is dedicated to Michelangelo (fig. 1). Together with the wonderful plaster casts of Michelangelo's sculptures (*Pietà*, *Dying Slave*) from the collection of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, as well as the figure of *Bacchus*, an insight into the artist's work is given. This also feels like a little reedition of the 2011 show. But less informative by just referring things one can easily get out of Wikipedia or biographies on the artist's life.



fig. 1 - Installation view, Room 1

In a traditional manner of curating, the artist is worked through chronologically. It does not refrain from perpetuating common places and anecdotes. At the same time, new research findings are not acknowledged. Not a word to gender studies (I will come later back to that). No expertise on his technique, what has been in 2011. The crosshatching you find in his early drawings clearly refer to engravings. Yes, we have prints by Pollaiuolo or Mantegna in the first room, but no hint to the making. They only compare the motive – here nudes, there nudes. They describe the difference in how unrealistic the nudes are compared to the later ones of Michelangelo, but even that could have been worked out more in detail. His technique is deeply inspired by the precision and consequent crosshatching of Northern Renaissance engravings. But Michelangelo didn't print, but he copied a lot after Giotto for instance, wherein he studied the plasticity

and corporality of the figures. Surely, he also knew prints by Albrecht Dürer. But as not Italian art they did not find a spot in that first rooms. Martin Schongauer's engraving Michelangelo should have copied as his first autonomous work in the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio is also in the collection of the Albertina, but neither shown nor even mentioned in the exhibition.

The exhibition makers take no risks in those first rooms. From a curatorial point of view, the works are more or less chronologically, but furthermore thematically embedded in the rooms as follows -

"Rebirth of the Body" (corporeality after Giotto), "Nudity by Template" (nudes by Mantegna and Pollaiolo), "A Tumult of Bodies" (studies for his battle of Cascina), "Mad about Michelangelo" (about the male nudes in the school of Fontainebleau), "Un sacco di noce or: Nature Distorted", "Under the Skin", etc. May those titles sound great to the layman, at least the last two points are not comprehensible.

Michelangelo hated nothing more than the damaged body. The exaggerations of Mannerism would have been a horror to him. Artists like Hendrick Goltzius or Jan Harmenszoon Muller certainly refer to Michelangelo's *figura serpentinata*, but via a grandiose exaggeration of muscles and body mass never seen before. But why

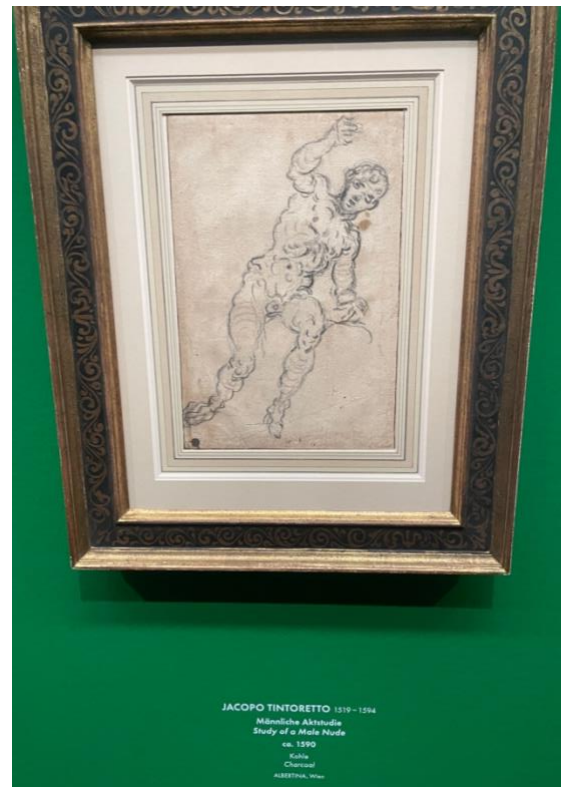


fig. 2 - Tintoretto, Study of a male figure, ca. 1590

does a drawing by Tintoretto is also presented here (fig. 2)? That study sheet from around 1590 from the collection shows a caricature of what other Mannerists accomplished. In the text of the great online collection catalogue of the Albertina, Achim Gnann correctly emphasises the cloud-like structure of Tintoretto's male figure and writes of a completely different style than the austerity of Michelangelo's drawings.⁴ Probably inspired by Michelangelo's figure repertoire, this shows a much more relaxed and dissolute male figure. One is reminded of the putti and little angels that have all too often emerged from the clouds since the Renaissance and especially in the Baroque. The position of the figure reminds at one sitting on a cloud. Or did Tintoretto also make fun of how Michelangelo's art was (mis)understood or interpreted by his following generation? One immediately thinks about Pietro Aretino's polemic and the controversy of *disegno* (Florence) and *colore* (Venice). Another common place, but not considered or deeper thought about in the exhibition.

⁴ To the drawing by Tintoretto:

[https://sammlungenonline.albertina.at/?query=search=/record/objectnumbersearch=\[24475\]&showtype=record](https://sammlungenonline.albertina.at/?query=search=/record/objectnumbersearch=[24475]&showtype=record)

The brilliant woodcuts from Andreas Vesalius' great anatomy book, the so-called *Fabrica* from 1543, are shown in the exhibition but not attributed to the artist Jan Stephan von Calcar, who was a pupil of Titian in Venice. Michelangelo's anatomy book project with the anatomist Realdo Colombo, which should have been a counterwork against Vesalius' *Fabrica*, never came to pass. Why was that so? The lapidary explanation was – due to the lack of documents – that the artist simply didn't have time. From today's view we cannot see Michelangelo as an illustrator like Calcar. Even Leonardo's sketches are completely different. In the exhibition we read again that Michelangelo also dissected bodies, studying muscles and movements. But we have no drawing of what lies under the skin. He worked with male models, athletes and studied the ancient sculptures. The energy of wrestler groups or the 1506 found Laocoon motivated him to be more precisely in realising a living moment in his bodies. Michelangelo's art literally gets under the skin, but it never shows an open wound. We know that he painted himself as the skin of Bartholomew in the Last Judgement. As a sculptor and draughtsman, he is always interested in the surface of bodies. The depth of movement comes to form on the skin and nowhere else. What has been said in various books to his drawings too. It's a deeper three-dimensional, sculptural thinking in every line, in every brushstroke he did. Depths articulates itself on the surface, at the skin and nowhere else. A focus on textures and skin would have been interesting, maybe in combination with depictions or prints of St. Bartholomew. New research results in that field are not considered. Calcars woodcuts and Michelangelo's art hang next to each other, but the context seems more forced than natural and on a simply content-related level.



fig. 3 - Daniele da Volterra, *Aeneas with a Boy*, ca. 1555/56

Fabrics cover. It is nice to see Daniele da Volterra's drawing of *Aeneas with a Boy* (ca. 1555/56) after 2011 also in that exhibition (fig. 3).⁵ In this drawing, a naked boy and an equally naked Aeneas seem to be fighting over a piece of fabric to dress. In any case, the artist became known as *Braghettone* (the breeches maker), since he had to overpaint Michelangelo's nude figures of the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine chapel immediately after the master's death. Now we have the prove that Daniele also knew how to draw genitals. The exhibition simply refers on the muscular body and its design as reference to Michelangelo's nudes. Correct, but not striking and getting the point like in the

⁵ To the drawing by Daniele da Volterra:

[https://sammlungonline.albertina.at/?query=search=/record/objectnumbersearch=\[497\]&showtype=record](https://sammlungonline.albertina.at/?query=search=/record/objectnumbersearch=[497]&showtype=record)

description of Achim Gnan for the exhibition 2011. The composition is inspired by Michelangelo and maybe he had made more designs for Daniele. We know for sure the drawings and studies he made for Sebastiano del Piombo.⁶ Having a list of artists with whom Michelangelo worked with, others who he directly inspired or copied him (hardly seen in the exhibition) and those who were not affected by him in a close way would have been helpful. This could have been done with texts or even graphics on the walls of the exhibition. Reducing the number of artworks and artists and going more into detail about a who-knew-who would have been interesting.

It is a pity that the targeted audience of the exhibition makers seem to be tourists, clueless businessmen or politicians. Because you see a lot of artworks, but you don't learn something new. Seeing the catalogue with no new research or even footnotes and a bibliography of traditionally elderly and conservative texts on the artist confirms that poor impression. Consulting the catalogue of the 2011 exhibition, you see how things could have been done much better (not just the works here shown as fig. 2 and fig. 3 were already part of that exhibition). Should not be the aim of an exhibition to explain each work of art (like done in 2011), to show new contexts and to put the work in a different perspective? Here one might think that is what the "Beyond" in the title "Michelangelo and Beyond" stands for. Unfortunately, the view beyond Michelangelo is ventured without having looked at Michelangelo more deeply. After the first rooms no drawing by Michelangelo or after him is featured anymore.⁷ You see different artists and other thematic groups. While two of them – "Rubens, or Michelangelo's Return" and "Woman, the unknown Being" – are still somewhat comprehensible, everything that follows is no longer understandable.

It's true that the Cinquecento artists hardly had female models to paint or draw after. One would question if Michelangelo was afraid of the female body too? The exhibition does not answer but claims that subconsciously. There is also no word to Michelangelo's sexuality. The literature on the gender topic in the Renaissance and to Michelangelo is ignored. It seems that for the exhibition makers those texts contextualising Renaissance artists in a latent gay environment are dispensable, but not even giving a lapidary comment seems strangely conservative and repressed. When we see Giovanni Battista Casanova's *Florentine Wrestlers* or both Hendrick Goltzius' *Hercules* figures we cannot misunderstand the meaning of them.⁸ Simply executing *symplegmatic* which means intertwining figures because of their artistic technical difficulties and as competition with original antique models continues a traditional canon in art history, but lags behind what has already been written, and even does not reflect what later artists have seen in that artworks.

⁶ The wonderful and insightful exhibition in the National Gallery in London 2017 must be mentioned: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/the-credit-suisse-exhibition-michelangelo-sebastiano>

⁷ Another exhibition in Bonn 2015 was interested in Michelangelo's direct aftermath – the homage: <https://www.bundeskunsthalle.de/ausstellungen/archivierte-ausstellungen/der-goettliche.html>

⁸ Of course, one also immediately thinks about Peter Greenaway's film "Goltzius and the Pelican Company" from 2012.

Grouping all those works of intertwining and wrestling male figures on a single wall or room would have been interesting. After Aby Warburg for instance – to whom a big exhibition in the Uffizi in Florence is dedicated right now – it could have been done thematically.⁹ But the thematical approach of the exhibition is bound to historical periods, to epochs, to styles. Today that seems dated. Most of the thematical headlines are without strong foundation. Grouping the works “beyond” Michelangelo always based on one work by the artist would have been more interesting. Because what happens to his works in the exhibition? In the end the name Michelangelo – and not his art – ends up being simply a figurehead for things to come and to lure as many visitors as possible to the Albertina. The inhomogeneity of the curator’s choices is obvious: The compromise of a chronological presentation leads away from Michelangelo. The text in the beginning of the exhibition maybe underlines that, but also reveals the shallowness of the concept: “Michelangelo and Beyond hence tells of a canon’s emergence and power as well as of that blind spot that Michelangelo’s art left behind his ideal was forced to give way to radical new depictions of human beings.”

The further the visitor goes, the more the exhibition tips over into a grotesque and unveils a lack of understanding of Michelangelo. It would have been good to emphasise later misunderstandings of Michelangelo’s art: such like Mannerism, as mentioned, but also Academism. The sheer dedication to lines and the forced plasticity of drawings of the 18th century (Le Moyne, Schmutzer, Batoni, etc.) is something completely different. How that? What happens here? Why is not much left of Michelangelo’s *vivacità*? Even when an ideal is still sought. It’s not enough to show that high quality drawings without making the differences obvious – or at least trying to do so. Also, even tourists probably want to know more. Why are these group of academical drawings less radical than Michelangelo’s drawings?

The following and final rooms are dedicated to depictions of the female body under the motto of the “Male Fear of the Female Sexuality”, which totally reveals a male gaze. But this male gaze isn’t addressed directly (next to Boucher, Rembrandt or Piazzetta no female artists are found). The curators just mention the woman as “terra incognita” and the defamation of her as a witch, whore or temptress. What is with her body? Why are Michelangelo’s studies of his masculine *Sibyls* of the ceiling of the Sistine chapel not hanging as counterpart next to later drawings in the exhibition? This would have been more interesting, than just seeing *erotic drawings* without thinking of Michelangelo anymore. Rather than making a room around the female body in art around Michelangelo (thinking of *Notte* and *Aurora* or *Leda*), they preferred to pack Hans Baldung’s brilliant witches and nudes to a room dedicated to the anatomy studies of Albrecht Dürer. It surprises that this room is anachronistic in the exhibition's course.

⁹ Information to the exhibition in Florence: <https://www.uffizi.it/en/events/rooms-with-a-view-aby-warburg-florence-and-the-laboratory-of-images%20>

Particularly dismissive is the last room with Egon Schiele's drawings. Tourists will certainly be pleased to see some of Schiele's nudes or self-portraits. But a more experienced visitor must have huge reservations. The exhibition ends with Schiele just to verify what the text at the beginning of the exhibition claims: "Schiele's pathologized portrayal of bodies (...) testify to how the Michelangesque canon of the male nude has declined in relevance (...)." That's a common saying, not an insight. The artists devalue each other. Why not making an example and hanging Schiele next to Michelangelo? Both are radical, but completely different. Schiele leads the line in a more expressive way and contrasts his drawings through highlighting the surrounding space of his figures in lighter tones than the paper. Michelangelo carves his figures highly structured by crosshatching out of the paper. Closer to Schiele would be for sure Dürer's drawings or the Northern Renaissance drawing style. Why not hanging Dürer next to Schiele? Technically that would be very interesting to see. In the end of the exhibition, not a lot of Michelangelo's art is left in mind anymore. Has time really made him irrelevant, like they say? It is absolutely not a good sign when you think of yourself as unearthy or unmodern seeing Schiele in the last room. The hanging does not strengthen the artworks. It weakens them. The exhibition's course and narrative created by the choices of the curators made Michelangelo's art irrelevant. Auguste Rodin – whose *Eve* from the collection of the Belvedere is also packed next in the last room next to Schiele – could prove them wrong. Anyway, the end could not be much worse. I immediately had to go back to the first rooms to delve deeper into Michelangelo's art on my own, just to finally leave the exhibition through the entrance.

Blown out, filled with as much as possible the exhibition is becoming rigid in its harsh chronological form with forced stereotypical themes. If you prefer walking through a boring dated introductory art history book, it's ok. But we already have the year 2023 and do not need that anymore. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate and know the people at the Albertina very well. I know that they are good scholars (real expertise on the individual works is even shown in the wonderful online collection catalogue) and they have the necessary depth and knowledge to think Michelangelo in an interesting, new and maybe also surprising way. Drawings and prints are – also after the dismissed Leo Steinberg – a huge source of reflexion and a field of study by the artists. When having an idea, one easily takes a sheet and starts sketching. It's the first action artists are doing. Joseph Meder, a former director of the Albertina, underlined that drawing is the most intimate action artists do.¹⁰ It's the closest to get to know the character

¹⁰ For Meder's book click here: <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.9755#0001>

This book about the Hand-Drawing (*Die Handzeichnung. Ihre Technik und Entwicklung*, Wien 1923 – second edition) is still the best you can get on the topic. Even for laymen or tourists it could be interesting to publish it again. I remember seeing it the first time in the library of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and was fascinated by the real samples of charcoal, red chalk, etc. inside. The quality of the writing itself is also outstanding.

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of an artist when studying drawings. We can learn vast volumes of text out of a single drawn line - especially by Michelangelo. With that wonderful collection revealing so many insights and details, manners, styles and techniques it simply hurts to see what has been done. Therefore, I am totally disappointed about the image this exhibition conveys.

With a wicked tongue, one could speak of a desecration of Michelangelo for commercial purposes. They serve nothing else than a fast-food Michelangelo with Schiele brownie as dessert for 18.90 €. And yet, this expensive menu seems more appropriate than a sustained pleasurable experience of the highest developed art of *disegno* (line-drawing). I would rather go and buy the dinosaur Godfather and Adam t-shirt, but unfortunately, I did not find it in the shop.

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