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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



MICHELANGELO

A RAGE TO CREATE

MICHELANGELO, VASARI, AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES: DRAWINGS FROM THE UFFZI
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BY MARK DANIEL COHEN



. . . the stern ethics which sparkle on his chisel-edge . . .
—Emerson



Let every man who is here understand this well: design, which by another name is called drawing, and consists of it, is the fount and body of painting and sculpture and of architecture and of every other kind of painting, and the root of all sciences. Let whoever may have attained to so much as to have the power of drawing know that he holds a great treasure; he will be able to make figures higher than any tower, either in colours or carved from the block, and he will not be able to find a wall or enclosure which does not appear circumscribed and small to his brave imagination.
—Michelangelo



Energy is Eternal Delight
—William Blake

I

One might read Shakespeare; one might listen to Bach; one might do battle with Einstein, or with David Hilbert and G. H. Hardy. One might spend one's life doing it. Or, one might look at Michelangelo.

Lists are by definition assemblies of comparables, and—ideally and in the sense in which their elements are comparable—their elements are incomparable to all else. Those names that accompany Michelangelo's by a principle of appropriateness, by a decorum—and there are others to be added, but not an enormity—are incomparable in the sense that they hold nothing in common with anyone off their roster.

The decorum is genius, and it is the ultimate protocol of incomparability. It is the principle of the inhuman—or if one likes, the uncanny—for it has nothing in common with any of the defining characteristics of the human. One could well think that such as Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Beethoven do what others are capable of, only better, immeasurably better, but an element is omitted from the formula, the result is a mere compound, and the quiddity has been

missed. There is more to this than a difference of degree so extreme that it amounts to a difference in kind. There is something further, something of the essence without which nothing of genius would appear to be genius and would indicate the essential nature of genius. There is something beyond these considerations that is unlike all else.

The physicist Freeman Dyson recently spoke to the matter in attempting to describe the distinguishing characteristic of Einstein's work.



I don't know how to describe it except to say, "that's genius." An ordinary person who is also a great scientist, he's much cleverer than we are but still does things in roughly the same way. A genius does things totally differently, and that's what was characteristic of Einstein. He just was profoundly original. It's just like asking what was special about Mozart. You can't describe it. All you can do is just listen.

Genius does not solve problems, it does not answer questions, it does not devise ideas, for problems are mere symptoms, questions are simply mice, and ideas are only splinters. Genius knows nothing of these fragments, these piecemeals. Its curiosity is global, its grasp is comprehensive, its reach unimpeded by self-restraint, by self-doubt, by self-perpetuating inability. It does not address—it steps back and transforms. It does not inch; it hurtles. It takes every opportunity for discovery as an impetus to reconceive the world—as the chance to begin again. It takes all it receives of past advances as material for a completely new conception, as moments of insight that require a return to zero in order to deliver their promise. Genius deals only in axioms, never in theorems. It accepts nothing that was seen before, and uses everything that was previously known. It is intrinsically universal, for it thinks only in terms of the universe. Which is to say there is a sense in which genius creates, and it creates always in works of art, for, regardless of its field of endeavor, it deals only in comprehensive conceptions. Its works are worlds unto themselves—they are complete and self-contained acts of imagination.

And so, genius is in its nature original; its defining characteristic is to be unlike. It continues no one's work, except to employ its antecedents to idiosyncratic purposes, for its vision and its means are thoroughly its own, and its nature is alien. It is a sweep of the back of the hand across all that precedes it, a brusque dismissal of the inevitable folly of guesswork, make-do propositions, and bad stabs.

Adrian Stokes recounted the characterization by Donato Giannotti of Michelangelo's invitations to company:



Donato Giannotti, the respected associate of both del Ricci and of Michelangelo, described in his two dialogues about Dante how that at the end of their discussions these close friends were unable to persuade Michelangelo to eat with them. He excuses himself on the grounds that he is more susceptible than anyone else of any time: on every occasion that he is among those who are skillful, who know how to do or say something out of the ordinary he is possessed by them, indeed robbed by them (*et me gli do in maniere in preda*): he is no more himself: not only the present company but anyone else at the table would separate him from a part of himself; and he wants to find and enjoy himself: it is not his trade to have much delight and entertainment: what he needs to do is to think about death: that is the only subject for thought which helps us to know ourselves, which may keep ourselves united in ourselves and save us from being dispersed and despoiled by relations, friends, geniuses, ambition, avarice, etc., etc.

Genius takes no companions, even when it desires them—it has no choice but to renege human society. It holds no compacts but with the widening perimeters of its wonderment, caught perpetually gazing at its inner suns, and the electric shocks by which it tempers its resolve and is recalled to its ambition. Genius thirsts for no ease and takes no rewards in rest. It has no investment in happiness, for the tirelessness of its dedication is to the final degree of fulfillment: self-completion. It seeks only to become what it is.

It is an exploding star, the spirit of thought. And genius fires from its center like solar flares, leaving immeasurable distances between itself and the surface lit comfortably tepid by the ordinary of inspirations. But as the radii course along their vectors, they gather monumental distances. They fan and spread like fingers stretching out into the midnight of the void, boosting the circumference along which they lie, and those possessed of genius are often at greater leagues from each other than they are from those they have left behind. And the further they progress, the more the growth of the expanses that separate them accelerates, the more rapidly they depart from the world, and from each other.

Even so, they are as like as they are unlike, for in everything but the material of their visions—in which each is distinct—in all but the universe in which each continually wraps himself, they are the stamps of each other. They partake of a single fate, which bears nothing of the common lot. And unknown as each ultimately is to the other, they have an instinct: that their brothers and sisters

are not to be located among the normal of the species. The species is not theirs. They are of each other alone.

And this fact compels us to reconsider the categories of our own orientations. Our interests in art, or in science, or in philosophy—the three fields to which, throughout the ages, genius traditionally flocks—are ignorant, sentimental, and self-congratulatory formulations. For the products of the imagination in their calibers do not group in that fashion. Michelangelo has more in common with Einstein and Newton, with Faraday and Maxwell, with Plato and Nietzsche, than he has with Bandinelli, Monet, and Rodin, with whom he shares nothing. Bach has more in common with Spinoza than he has with Gershwin, with whom he shares nothing. To consider Michelangelo an artist is to do ourselves the compliment of implying he is engaged in that in which we can accomplish something, but it is not so. In the truth of it, there is no point at which his orbit and ours intersect. We gaze upon his achievement as upon a nebula.

Genius groups with genius, within the list of incomparables. The otherwise artists, and scientists, philosophers, craftspersons, and on, may belong with each other by trade, but they do not belong with such as these. And we may think that our interests in these crafts—our fascinations for the sake of their transportive potential, their transformative capabilities, their magic and possibilities for invoking sudden realization and ruminative recognitions—are calibrated to the component parts of the genius effect and not the capacities of the practices its occasion partakes. It may well be that it is genius that takes us, and not art, for if the extraordinary is the matter, it is genius that is the essential category, and not art.

This is a matter much to the moment, as art over the past several decades has, clearly and by intention, become democratized. But genius is not so distributable; it does not divide, it does not rehabilitate its allotment. It will be where it will be found, and if “art” is to be re-distributed among all who wish to practice it according to the mere impulse to practice it, if one warrants the legitimacy of the designation by self-nomination, then the reason of its attraction to others will be fled elsewhere. For the magic is not pinned to the business card, and the nomination, regardless of what was named, was never the point, but the authenticity, and the effect. The more people who can legitimately claim to be making “art,” the less we have reason to care, and if the power to see right through was the principle of the attraction, then all along, it was genius we cared for. Art was merely one of the repositories where we once reliably found it, and nothing more, and all of aesthetics was the analysis, more accurately, of power of mind, and the Dionysian is what genius does.

All of which is why there is a clear and inevitable imbalance in “Michelangelo, Vasari, and Their Contemporaries: Drawings from the Uffizi.” The exhibition

contained two drawings by Michelangelo and nearly 80 drawings by other Florentine artists of the late Italian Renaissance, all coming from the collection of the Uffizi Gallery. The principal curatorial intent was to display drawings by the artists who worked on the redecoration of the Palazzo Vecchio under Cosimo I de' Medici when Cosimo moved his residence from the traditional Medici family home to the governmental headquarters of Florence, a move intended to affirm his absolute political power. The project of restoration of the Palazzo Vecchio was begun in 1555 under the direction of Giorgio Vasari, and the curatorial contention here was that drawing—*disegno*—was central to the planning of the renewal of the palace.

However, the curatorial contention can be said to have been followed loosely at best. There were drawings that relate directly to the frescos created in the redecoration of the palazzo, but frequently the artists who were involved in the restoration project were represented by drawings that had nothing to do with their works in the palazzo. Furthermore, the artists who worked on the redesigned palazzo constituted only one of three groups in the exhibition. The pertinent artists were presented as the second group, "Vasari and His Collaborators," which included Alessandro Allori, Bernardo Buontalenti, Giovanni Stradanus, Santi di Tito, and Giovan Battista Naldini. The range of material was expanded by a first group—"The Great Masters," the predecessors of Vasari's artists, which included Michelangelo (who never would have worked for Cosimo I for he so loathed Cosimo that he moved permanently to Rome once Cosimo took power), Andrea del Sarto, Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, Francesco Salviati, and Bronzino—and a third group—"The Painters of the Studiolo," those who worked for the heir of Cosimo I, which included such late Mannerist artists as Girolamo Macchietti, Maso da San Friano, and Poppi.

It is of course impossible to estimate the curatorial contention from the material presented. There was no comparison, or possibility of comparison, of the *disegno* with the frescos to which they contributed, and in more cases than not, the drawings were not those that made the contribution, for in many cases, the artists were not those who made the contributions. It is argued in the press materials that all the artists in the exhibition contributed works to the Palazzo Vecchio, at one time or another, which is a somewhat different contention from the stated purpose.

What one found, ultimately, was an exhibition of late Italian drawings, representing a significant number of the Florentine masters of the period through drawings of a kind that rarely come to this country, and it would be absurd to say that is not enough. The mere presence of two drawings by Michelangelo significantly increased the percentage of works in this hemisphere by the ultimate master of the art. Besides, these concerns are scholarly ones, and they are fair enough, but they are categorically different



Francesco Salviati (Francesco de' Rossi) (1510–1563), *The Age of Gold*, (1543–48)

Pen and brown wash, white heightening over traces of black chalk

16 5/16 x 21 in. (414 x 533 mm)

Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 1194E

facing page, lower right

Baccio Bandinelli (1493–1560), *Portrait of Duke Cosimo dei Medici*, ca. 1544

Black chalk, stumped, 268 x 204 mm (10 9/16 x 8 in.)

Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 15010 F

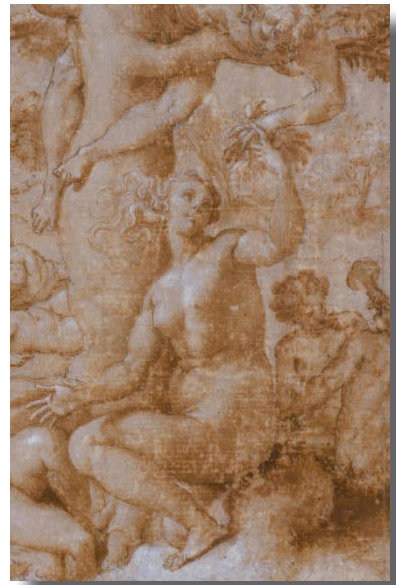
from the aesthetic concerns that are under consideration here. What one had was what one saw: a large collection of works from one of the most extraordinary periods in art, executed by some of the most impressive artists to have worked in the field, executed in the medium in which the artist is most exposed and revealed, in which the artist is most reliant on innate ability and on the most personal technique, in

which the artist simply “thinks.” And one was thereby confronted by the most essential of aesthetic questions: among a display of sheer excellence, from one of the most “excellent” places and periods in art, one is compelled to consider, what is excellence worth? Aside from the pure dazzlement, what is accomplished? What does the genius of the excellent do?

To make this estimate, rather, one must first disabuse oneself of a contention that is wide-ranging in the study of art and is certainly assumed by this exhibition—that an astonishing number of the artists of the Italian Renaissance, and all the artists in this exhibition, were, in fact, excellent. An astonishing number were—enough that one must wonder on the very fact of a renaissance, on how such a moment can arise, how it has arisen in the arts and philosophy three times at least to our knowledge—but not as many as we tend to think, and not all that are represented here. Thereby the imbalance—despite Vasari’s claim in his famous book that Michelangelo had shown artists the means of excellence, and artists were then capable of producing what those prior to the master had been able only to work towards, we find that such excellence is not transferable, and the surface gloss of fine polish and studied technique does not institute the substructure of brilliant vision and conception. The genius of the thing lies elsewhere.

Simply, although there are many moments of astonishing execution here, there are also flaws that in many cases are outside the range of what one should expect in work of this renown.

Many examples found here are egregious and astounding once one prepares oneself to see them. For instance, the flaw in Francesco Salviati's *The Age of Gold* is a remarkable example of a figure getting away from the artist. Examine the woman in the middle left foreground, sitting on a rock and against a tree trunk, reaching up to a hand descending from the tree. The stomach on the figure simply does not work. The navel is off the axial of the chest, positioned somewhere to the figure's right side, if estimated from the position of the chest cavity. The planes that flow from the lower abdomen to the left hip make no sense—where we see a diagonal highlight indicating a plane that should face to the upper left of the drawing, the figure seems to drop away, as if a void appeared where mass should be, which is what happens when a plane does not seem to connect to those positioned next to it. What has happened, to all appearances, is that the upper and lower torso have not been properly established in relation to each other—each does not flow through the waist into the other; they simply abut, and at an angle that makes no sense. Or, more precisely, there is no waist—the upper and lower portions of the body just slam together, each facing in a direction slightly different from that of the other.



One might call this Mannerism, given that Salviati was a Mannerist. But there is a difference between bending the rules of figure composition and simply failing to observe them, between an altered arithmetic and a failure to lay out the parts so that they add up at all—there is a difference between a choreography of elements and an inability to dance. This appears not to be style—this appears to be a mistake.

A judgment similar to that regarding the distance between stylistics and ineptitude is called up with regard to Baccio Bandinelli's *Portrait of Cosimo I del Medici*, but here the question is the dividing line between accuracy of rendition and clumsiness of execution. Or, more simply, could he really have looked like that? There is no point in comparing this work with other portraits, for the question is not accuracy with regard to this sitter but credibility with regard to the human form. Or, more simply still, could anyone really have looked like this?



The answer is fairly obvious—no, for the disembarkations from the idealized human face are not so much violations of the principles of



**Pontormo (1494–1556), *Two Studies of Male Figures*, (1521–21)
 Black chalk and red chalk, red wash, heightened with white chalk (v.)—Red chalk (r.)
 11 1/4 x 16 1/16 in. (285 x 408 mm)
 Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 6740F**

beauty as they are violations of the principles of anatomy. The pop-eyed face is not merely pop-eyed—the eyeballs are so distorted, they are no longer spherical, or not close enough to spherical. In throwing Cosimo’s gaze forcefully to the left side of the sheet, Bandinelli has nearly pulled his eyes out of his head. And this is not quite surprising coming from the artist

whose sculpture *Hercules and Cacus*, which still stands in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence and a sketch for which is included here, was described by Cellini as resembling “an old sack full of melons propped up against a wall,” rather than a perfected architecture of rippling musculature.

Pontormo, whose *Two Studies of Male Figures* is just splendid, has problems similar to those of Salviati in *Eve’s Expulsion from Earthly Paradise*. The lower abdomen faces the wrong direction, the navel is positioned off the axial, and the function of the waist has not been thought through. The thighs seem to be too small, out of scale with the rest of the figure. And the application of male anatomy to a female figure lacks the finesse—or the clear deliberateness of a lack of finesse, which is finesse of a different order—of he from whom Pontormo obtained it: the master. Distinctly masculine formations of musculature seem to have been slapped on piecemeal, without having been conceived into a whole figure, a coherent form.

The inconsistency in the drawings of Vasari would be no surprise to anyone familiar with this work. His *St. John the Evangelist* is unerring, if ultimately unimpressive—there are no glaring technical flaws, there is clear and solid skeletal and muscular structure worked out, line weight is delicately modulated and used precisely. However, the figure is fairly inexpressive in posture, indicative of no clear attitude or action, and indistinctive in outline, in the flat, two-dimensional form it cuts. In that regard, it is rather blob-like.

Even so, this work is Vasari at his strength. His nadir is witnessed in such as *The Triumph of Cosimo I at Montemurlo*. Examine the faces of the figures, which distort in all manner of error. Several of the captives in the foreground,

which are situated in the lower third of the drawing, are inadvertently drawn along a curve—something that tends to happen when one holds the paper at an angle while sketching. The face of the figure immediately to the right of Cosimo collapses in on itself. Furthermore, the composition is done at deep perspective, but the perspective has not been worked through and is not carried out with consistency. The largest figures in the middle ground—found to the extreme right of the drawing—should be at a great distance, based on the scale. But there is nothing in the drawing that positions them so far away from the foreground—the orthogonal distance between the foreground figures and the middle ground figures has not been accounted for. They are not distant—they are simply too small. Given that, the line of figures extending back in the middle ground diminish by increments that are too small—there is no room for so many, they are bunched together too tightly, so tightly, the entire scene is not physically credible.



There are many other examples here of errors of execution comparable to these, and there are numerous instances of remarkable deftness and ability—demonstrations of what may be considered the ideal of the art of drawing, of what artists through the ages have labored and studied to achieve, instances of the paradigmatic of the mode. Notable in particular are Andrea del Sarto's *Studies of a Male Model Seated on the Ground* and, on the verso, *Study of Drapery*; everything by Bronzino; Girolamo Macchietti's *Head of a Young Man*; Alessandro Allori's male nudes; Giovan Battista Naldini's *Seated Male Nude*; and Poppi's *Four Heads*.

And then there are the two drawings by Michelangelo, and even in comparison to these paradigmatic examples of draftsmanship, the difference is categorical. His *Studies of a Male Leg* is, for Michelangelo, fairly unfinished—what qualifies as a “sketch” for the master: loose, quick, inconsistently detailed, as if he filled in definition only on those portions of one leg that concerned him at that moment. Compared to everything else here, the drawing contains, even in the loosest sections, a wealth of observation of musculature and integration of parts, as if Michelangelo took more trouble than any of these other artists—although one suspects it is more a matter of knowledge than of ready dedication. But there is something else to this, something other than the issue of accuracy. There is a distinctive ratio here of means to effect, of the amount of drawing done, the sheer number of lines committed, to the quality of solidity and density of form achieved. The efficiency of visual expression is stunning. The form seems like rock, or marble if one likes—it has congealed

Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), *St. John the Evangelist*
Black chalk
14 5/16 x 8 3/8 in. (353 x 253 mm)
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; 14274