

Michelangelo: A Life on Paper by Leonard Barkan. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. Illustrated. 366 pages.

Review by Gail Leggio

This bracingly erudite study of Michelangelo (1475–1564) approaches the life and work of the Renaissance genius from a novel perspective. Leonard Barkan focuses on the paper trail, which is unusually extensive: the artist retained and reused a great many sheets during his long life, and his importance was so universally acknowledged that, from the beginning, they were highly valued. We have between 500 and 600 drawings by Michelangelo, and roughly half of those feature autograph text. Around a quarter of Michelangelo’s manuscript poems feature drawings. There is an enormous body of scholarship on Michelangelo, a great deal



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Ideal Head of a Woman*
c. 1525–28
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on his draftsmanship and a substantial amount on his poetry. What is rarely remarked upon is the fact that finished drawings and fair-copy drafts of poems co-exist, on many sheets, alongside doodles, mundane ephemera such as shopping lists, even visual and verbal jokes, juxtaposed in ways modern viewers may find disconcerting. Barkan takes as his subject “this curious act of multitasking” and how it “gives us a glimpse of the artist using his sheets of paper as a protean field of invention.”

Barkan, professor of comparative literature at Princeton University and the author of several interdisciplinary books on the Renaissance, has had occasion to consider Michelangelo before. In *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (Yale University Press, 1986), he places Michelangelo’s drawings of Tityus and Ganymede in the context of Petrarch’s erotic psychology. In *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (Yale University Press, 1999), he discusses Michelangelo’s propensity

for not finishing his sculptural projects in relation to the cult of the antique fragment. The notion of the *non finito* also underlies Barkan's approach in *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper*. Surely, there is more at work than a frugal impulse to conserve paper, Barkan suggests, in Michelangelo's habit of using back and front or rotating a page to find a fresh space, where he may place an ideal head check-by-jowl with some crude bit of verbal or visual tomfoolery.

This heavily illustrated volume offers many examples. One of Michelangelo's most polished drawings, *Ideal Head of a Woman* (black chalk, c. 1525–28, British Museum), sits in splendid isolation on the recto of the sheet. Her profile is as elegant as that of an antique cameo; the elaborately styled hair and head-dress, with a heavy braid coiling through a kind of mermaid crown, is a tour de force of line and shadow. But the verso is a scratch pad mélange: four inept student faces, a rough but effective screaming fury by the master and a squatting defecator. Front and back at least seem discrete, in this case. Other sheets are more miscellaneous. A late 1550s sketch from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, roughs out an encounter between the Virgin and the Annunciate angel (or, in an alternate reading, Christ appearing to his mother after the Resurrection). Above the Virgin's head, at a rakish angle, Michelangelo has written a note about sending ten scudi to a painter and firewood to a widow, conflating “holy representation and personal Post-It.” This kind of promiscuity fascinates Barkan, who feels he has been given permission “to take account of all the markings on the sheet of paper, not because Michelangelo was designing them as organic works of art, but because their constituent parts add up to documents in a life.”

If the suggestion of speculative license sounds vaguely Freudian, Barkan is willing to acknowledge that some kind of psychoanalytic commentary plays a legitimate role in the multifarious history of art criticism. But Barkan is too learned and too intellectually nimble to reduce his readings to tidy exercises in order to accommodate theoretical strictures. The cult of individual genius was in full swing in the High Renaissance, and Michelangelo certainly found his own creative process and emotional turmoil riveting. He quoted, paraphrased and imitated Petrarch a great deal, and Barkan's insight into one of the original and most self-involved of sonnet writers enriches our understanding of Michelangelo. Barkan titles his first chapter “Hieroglyphics of the Mind,” building on two epigraphs, one from J.A. Symonds on Michelangelo, the other from Kenneth Clark on Leonardo. He traces the idea that, while masterpieces are the public face of the artist, “sketches...represent the artist's interior life, even in ways of which the artist himself may not be aware,” back beyond Vasari to the late antique writer Pliny. Chapter 1 serves as an exemplary exercise in the compare-and-contrast pedagogic trope, as the author considers the different ways Leonardo and Michelangelo combined text and image on the page. Leonardo's codices are full of elegant pages in which text explains drawing and drawing illustrates text, often pages presenting inventions or breaking down

the body into muscle groups. Michelangelo, in contrast, may add to an écorché drawing of human legs three lines of verse about two beautiful eyebrows. There are many ways of combining text and image. Barkan mentions the Renaissance puzzles known as emblems, most famously propagated in the many editions of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, and the tradition continues with intriguing examples outside the purview of this study, notably in the work of William Blake. It is no surprise that Barkan has announced as his next book a study of the subject, entitled *Mute Poetry Speaking Pictures*.

Michelangelo's confluences are not as tidy as Ripa's or Blake's, so questions of the artist's intention—always a tricky line of inquiry—are slippery and perhaps ultimately unsolvable. But Barkan's patient attention pays off in illuminating ways. The dynamic of Michelangelo's studio plays out in sheets he shared with his students. On the verso of a red-and-black chalk drawing of profiles, locks of hair and sixteen eyes (c. 1525, Ashmolean Museum), it is difficult sorting out master from pupils. But on the recto of the sheet, Michelangelo takes over with "a brilliant *invenzione*," a splendid, torturously twisted dragon, with bared fangs, baleful eyes and clawed foot. Rich cross-hatch shading gives the beast solidity. The cleverest part of the drawing, however, is how Michelangelo has incorporated a couple of rudimentary student profiles into the composition—one inside the beast's coils, the other hovering above it. The "student's human head and the Master's monster," Barkan notes, are presented in "a perfect cross-species nose-to-snout juxtaposition."

This particular example of master-apprentice interaction—by no stretch could it be considered a collaboration—points up one way Michelangelo differs from other great artists of the period, who used the studio system not only as a source of cheap labor but also as a way to pass on their skills. Raphael was working in Perugino's studio by age 17, and his early work is sometimes nearly indistinguishable from his master's. Raphael was only 37 when he died, but he had a thriving atelier; his most important pupil was Giulio Romano. Michelangelo was formally apprenticed to Ghirlandaio, but he rarely acknowledged the fact. While he picked up skills, such as fresco application, from Ghirlandaio, there is no stylistic affinity between the two artists. Michelangelo had some pupils, but they did not emerge as significant artists in their own right. Perhaps he was too imposing, too self-involved and idiosyncratic to have a school. It is no surprise, then, that the works Barkan considers are, for the most part, episodes in "a one-man conversation," albeit "as likely to be multi-voiced, cacophonous, and filled with non sequiturs as an encounter among diverse contemporaries."

One of the most intriguing sheets discussed in this book consists of a poem and sketch (c. 1512, Casa Buonarroti, Florence) dealing with the hazards of painting a ceiling. The sheet has attracted attention because of its connection to the Sistine Chapel, although Barkan cautions that the upright figure in the margin and the language of the complaint cannot be taken as a definitive

answer to the standing-versus-lying controversy. The text playfully describes the awkwardness of the assignment: “My beard points to heaven, and I feel the nape of my neck on my hump; I bend my breast like a harpy’s and, with its nonstop dripping from above, my brush makes my face a richly decorated floor.” The little sketch in the margin is even jokier in tone, a cartoon more in the modern sense of a humorous drawing than in the Renaissance sense of a preparatory design. The figure reaching up is no more than an outline, a doodle by someone with a first-rate knowledge of anatomy. The partial figure on the ceiling is hilarious, a series of rounded shapes given human personality with google eyes and four hairs standing on end. It seems hard, at first, to reconcile this jeu d’esprit with the epic ambition of the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling. Or, for that matter, with the Olympian ease of the artist in W.B. Yeats’s great lyric “Long-Legged Fly” (*Last Poems*, 1936–39):

There on the scaffolding reclines
Michel Angelo
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

Of course, Yeats’s choice of the famously self-tormented Michelangelo as one of his protagonists is no misjudgment. The other two historical figures in the poem are Julius Caesar and Helen of Troy, neither noted for their philosophical detachment. Yeats himself knew how much personal turmoil lay behind the transcendent moments of art-making.

Barkan is extraordinarily patient in his sifting of the material, and patience is required of the reader. There are reproductions of master drawings scattered through the book, but Barkan devotes much of his attention to material that is not particularly visually striking. That said, the decision to present nearly all of the sheets in color is commendable. The subtleties are clearer, and we share, to some extent, Barkan’s experience in the archives and follow his thoughts as he teases out meaning. *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper* offers fresh insights into one of history’s most complex and creative minds, and into how so idiosyncratic a genius functioned in the context of Renaissance social and intellectual systems. Beyond those immediate concerns stretches a host of issues, including the expectations that help shape the history of art criticism. This is neither a seductive coffee-table book nor a general introduction to Michelangelo’s thought. But there is nothing dry about Barkan’s scholarship. He brings a born storyteller’s verve to a trawl through the archives. His ideas are exciting, and the warmth and wit of his prose make the book a pleasure to read.