

# Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master

23 March – 25 June 2006

Room 5, admission £10, concessionary rates apply

The first Michelangelo exhibition at the British Museum in thirty years, *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master* offers an extraordinary insight into the creative thinking of one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance. Sponsored by BP, the exhibition spotlights Michelangelo's particular brilliance as a draftsman. The Florentine fulfilled the Renaissance ideal of universal artistic genius, excelling as a sculptor, painter and architect. The common strand linking his achievements is drawing, as the originality of his works in paint, marble or architectural design was arrived at only after an exhaustive process of refinement on paper. The central importance of drawing remained a constant in Michelangelo's artistic practice, and it is only through this medium that the course of his career can be comprehensively followed. From pen studies made when he was in his early twenties to the visionary *Crucifixion* scenes carried out six decades later shortly before his death, this exhibition reunites material not seen together since the posthumous dispersal of his studio in 1564. It offers a unique opportunity to gain an understanding of Michelangelo's remarkable artistic powers, and to witness the invention and development of some of his most celebrated works.

Michelangelo's drawings were highly prized by his contemporaries, their rarity magnified by the knowledge that he burnt large quantities of them before his death. Northern European collectors shared this enthusiasm, and this is reflected in the quality of the 95 studies selected for the exhibition from three of the greatest repositories of his drawings: the Teyler Museum in Haarlem; the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; and the British Museum. The drawings will be joined by two paintings on loan from the National Gallery based on designs by Michelangelo in the exhibition (*Christ Purifying the Temple* attributed to his follower Marcello Venusti and an anonymous copy after his lost *Leda and the Swan*); sculptural models including two portraits of the artist; a classical bust; and a contemporary album of architectural drawings. A dozen letters on loan from the British Library written or addressed to Michelangelo give an insight into the artist's way of thinking and give a powerful impression of his complex, prickly nature.

The course of Michelangelo's career is mapped chronologically, with a particular emphasis placed on the suite of drawings connected to some of his most important projects. The first of these dates from Michelangelo's service to the first Florentine Republic in the period 1501-4, when the sculptor, was pitted against Leonardo da Vinci, to paint one of two gigantic murals celebrating Florentine victories in the Palazzo Vecchio. Michelangelo, like Leonardo, failed to deliver the work, but his full-size drawing of the central episode showing Florentine soldiers hurriedly preparing themselves for battle after a dip in the River Arno (hence the work's title, the *Bathers*) electrified his contemporaries because of the dramatic representation of male nudes in dynamic motion. Life studies for three of the soldiers give a vivid impression of the impact of this lost work, and reveal how carefully Michelangelo plotted the poses of each of the figures. In 1505 he was summoned to Rome by Julius II and within a few years was commissioned to fresco the vault of the Sistine chapel (1508-12), a work that is the highpoint of his sensual glorification of the idealized male nude. The fifteen studies related to the project range from diminutive sketchbook

cont/...

pages covered with quickly penned ideas for poses, to some of his most exquisitely finished red chalk figure studies. Among the latter works, which rank among the most influential drawings in European art, are studies for the *Creation of Adam* and the *Crucifixion of Haman*. A pen drawing from the British Museum is a rare witness to Michelangelo's starting point for the scheme, revealing how far his ideas evolved to reach the eventual design.

The middle part of Michelangelo's career (1516–34) was spent almost exclusively in Florence working in the service of the two Medici popes, Leo X and his cousin Clement VII, on a number of projects connected with their family church of S. Lorenzo. The exhibition documents the sculptor's experimentation to find the right forms for the Medici tombs, and brings together for the first time all the surviving studies for the protean figure of *Day*, one of the four allegorical marbles in the chapel. During these years Michelangelo also made instructional drawings in a vain attempt to train his untalented pupils, the finest examples of which are included in the exhibition. One of his pupils was the handsome Florentine patrician youth, Andrea Quaratesi, who Michelangelo portrayed in a rare portrait study, perhaps as a gift to the family for sheltering him after the Second Florentine Republic ended with the city's recapture by the Medici in 1530. Although Michelangelo was forgiven his support for the Republic by Clement VII, he left the city never to return in 1534.

Back in Rome he was commissioned by Clement VII to paint the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine chapel. Michelangelo's highly original vision of the end of the world as a swirling maelstrom around the triumphant figure of Christ reflects his deeply held Christian beliefs. The heavysset figures that populate the scene, their forms deliberately abstracted from the lithe sensuality of those that he had painted on the same chapel's vault, are supreme examples of Michelangelo's ability to express the entire gamut of human emotions through the posture and torsion of the body. The exhibition boasts the most complete gathering of Michelangelo's figure studies for the fresco, as well as a rare compositional study drawn when he was planning the overall design. In the last decades of his life he dedicated himself to architectural projects including the Farnese palace and St Peter's, two projects for which there are studies in the show. Michelangelo kept drawing right until the end, and his tremulous hand and faltering sight can be seen in the final *Crucifixion* drawings in black chalk and lead white heightening. These works were almost certainly private devotional works, his fears of the imminence of death and his hopes for redemption poignantly expressed. He died in February 1564, at the age of eighty-eight, a letter in the exhibition describes how the sickening and anguished artist had been found days before his death wandering alone in the rain outside his house. His body was carried back to Florence where he was buried with great pomp in the church of his ancestral quarter, S. Croce.

**For public information please print: 020 7323 8000 or [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk)  
For further press information or images please contact Hannah Boulton on 020 7323 8522  
or [hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk).**

#### **Notes to Editors:**

- Exhibition Opening Hours: 10.00 – 17.30 Saturday – Wednesday, 10.00 – 20.30 Thursday – Friday
- The accompanying hardback book by Hugo Chapman, published by the British Museum Press and priced at £40, explores the evolution of Michelangelo as an artist and features hundreds of illuminating drawings and comparative illustrations.
- The exhibition will be supported by an extensive public programme for young and adult audiences. This will include family drawing days, exhibition talks, lectures, study sessions, and a film season. For more information please contact the press office. Provisions have been made for visitors with visual or hearing impairment.
- BP is the British Museum's largest and most longstanding corporate sponsor, supporting the Museum on an annual basis since 1998. Most recently, BP supported 'Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia' and 'Mummy: the inside story'.