Date and Time: Friday, June 21, 2019 11:40:00 AM EDT

Job Number: 91452744

Document (1)

1. *Drawn into life*

Client/Matter: -None-

Search Terms: drawn into life

Search Type: Natural Language

Narrowed by:

Content Type	Narrowed by
News	Sources: The Australian; Content Type: News

Drawn into life

Weekend Australian

November 29, 2008 Saturday, 5 - All-round Review Edition

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Section: REVIEW; Pg. 14

Length: 1221 words

Byline: Philip ***Drew***

Body

How Michelangelo Discovered his Manner: Michelangelo, ***Drawing*** and the Invention of Architecture

By Cammy Brothers

Yale University Press, 259pp, $120

FOR Renaissance artists and theorists, ***drawing*** supplied a direct connection between painting, sculpture and architecture. Michelangelo, for example, made serial preliminary sketches and multiple overlays of them to identify and explore ideas for his paintings and sculptures.

Cammy Brothers is a young associate professor at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, a campus famous for its Roman rotunda and colonnade by Thomas Jefferson. Her special interest is ***drawing***, notably the way it is interrelated with creativity and invention in Michelangelo's work. His drawings reveal the process by which he became an architect. Previous studies focused narrowly on his architectural drawings in relation to the eventual buildings; Brothers shows how they emerged from the artist's earlier figurative drawings.

Michelangelo came late to architecture. He is best known for his revision of the Sangallo design for the Basilica of St Peter and its dome, but there are other examples, including the Medici tomb and Laurentian Library in Florence, and the Capitoline Hill and the Palazzo Nuovo in Rome.

But his true subject was the human body. It was his primary medium for expressing the Platonic view, which re-emerged in the Renaissance, of the body as the prison of the soul, the source of enormous tension in his art and architecture. Brothers shows how Michelangelo developed techniques that allowed him to show the body in a prodigious range of poses.

Michelangelo was jealous of his reputation, which he fostered, as a rebel who set out to outdo the ancients. The Renaissance pictorial approach was founded on the invention of perspective: Michelangelo declared that ``perspective is a waste of time''. His famous ceiling frescoes for the Sistine Chapel ignore perspective. Indeed, they are typical of what came to be known as his manner, his wilful overturning of Renaissance norms to shock and amaze.

It was through ***drawing*** that Michelangelo explored these outer limits. Brothers suggests ***drawing*** is akin to speech, both of which can function as a ``second wheel'', running parallel with the mind. Just as speaking can complete a thought, so can ***drawing***, a process that facilitates improvisation and chance discovery. It is thinking on the page and Michelangelo's use of it in his approach to architecture mesmerised European culture for almost two centuries.

The Western art tradition is indebted to Michelangelo more than any other artist for the elevation of ***drawing*** as an active thought process. The technical term for it, disegno, covers more than the simple act of ***drawing***. It includes

the acts of conception and design. ***Drawing*** uniquely records the tentative, convulsive, haphazard process whereby an idea is brought into the world. Michelangelo's sketches give unparalleled insight into the processes of discovery and invention. They reveal slow, steady work, not the sudden flash of inspiration usually attributed to genius.

Like many of his contemporaries, Michelangelo copied. It was believed that only through imitation could one find one's own voice. First the ***drawing*** was made, then other ideas might emerge from what was on the sheet. Typically, Michelangelo produced a great many drawings, reworking figural ideas. He followed Leonardo's practice of generating ideas by overlaying several solutions at once or by setting out a range of possibilities across the page.

Through a series of consistent operations -- rotation, inversion, mirroring, stretching, twisting -- Michelangelo repeated the same figures endlessly. Among other techniques, he would use wax models that he rotated and sketched repeatedly from different angles.

Brothers first examines how Michelangelo sketched in red chalk the figures he would use in painting and sculpture. Then she turns her attention to his application of the same method to architecture, and it is here that the book makes its most valuable contribution.

She has assembled an extraordinary number of Michelangelo's preparatory drawings for the Medici tomb and the Laurentian Library, which were completed between 1505 and 1534, the early phase of his development as an architect. She traces his evolution and the establishment of his expressionist approach to architecture.

Before Michelangelo, architects were advised to study the ancient Roman models, much as bodies were dissected in the study of human anatomy. But Michelangelo copied only what interested him -- classical profiles and details in particular -- and modified them to his taste. He wasn't interested in reconstructing ruins, much less discovering rules of proportion or learning about ancient architectural conventions from accepted authorities such as Vitruvius.

He rejected classical rules and overthrew classical orthodoxies. He overturned, freely reinterpreted and distorted the ancient past.

He copied from a book of measured drawings known as the Codex Coner and attributed to

15th-century Florentine architect Lorenzo della Volpaia, for example, but while the goal of his colleagues was to imitate, Michelangelo preferred to show his superiority.

Brothers takes the reader on the fascinating journey step by step, ***drawing*** after ***drawing***, following Michelangelo's progress towards becoming an architect. Even with this detailed analysis, however, his architecture seems to jump out from nowhere. We see him apply his earlier methods in a way that has startlingly far-reaching consequences in a culture that had come to revere the antique. His legacy is one of chaos and anarchy: the classical order was disassembled.

In classical theory, for example, a column represented a human figure: the head, torso or trunk, and feet are represented by capital, shaft and base. Much as the human figure experiences gravity, classical columns were imagined as resisting the force of gravity, which squashed the base under the load of the entablature above it. Occasionally, in copying the classical profile of a building, Michelangelo would substitute the outline of a human face.

Michelangelo dissolved the classical scaffolding, breaking it into separate fragments. He

re-embodied the classical orders as structures of bones and muscles; wall surfaces that became skin. Something that was previously active and strong became passive and incoherent.

Architectural frames -- whether in paintings, statuary niches, doorways or windows -- were supposed to be supports that established stable boundaries. Instead of putting pilasters on the face of the wall, he imprisoned them within walls, like the man trying to break out of the stone in his famous sculpture, The Dying Slave. In his architecture, nothing is what it seems.

Michelangelo belongs to every epoch that makes a hero of individual genius. He could be described as the first celebrity artist: like Frank Gehry today, he was obsessed with creating a personal style.

Brothers's account of Michelangelo's emergence as an architect is brilliant, clear and exciting. Architects and artists would do well to read it, if only to rediscover the creativity implicit in the act of ***drawing***.

Philip ***Drew***'s latest book is New Tent Architecture (Thames & Hudson). He heads an effort to set up a national Australian architecture museum.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: AUS

Subject: ***DRAWING*** & ILLUSTRATION (93%); ARCHITECTURE (90%); PAINTING (90%); SCULPTURE (90%); CELEBRITIES (78%); RELIGIOUS FACILITIES (78%); VISUAL ARTISTS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (73%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (60%)

Company: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS (58%)

Organization: YALE UNIVERSITY (84%); UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (57%)

Industry: ARCHITECTURE (90%); ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (90%); DRAFTING (78%); CELEBRITIES (78%); VISUAL ARTISTS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (73%)

Geographic: ROME, ITALY (77%); VIRGINIA, USA (78%)

Load-Date: November 28, 2008

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