



ARRIS

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Front Cover:

Destrehan Plantation, Destrehan, Louisiana, 1787-90, rear elevation. (Photograph by Laura Ewen Blokker)



Cammy Brothers. *Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 272 pp., 200 black-and-white and 40 color illustrations, cloth, \$65.00, ISBN 0-300-12489-9.

Michelangelo's startling inventiveness as an architect is illuminated by a study of his drawings and drawing methods in Cammy Brothers' book, *Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture* (Yale University Press, 2008). Brothers investigates Michelangelo's artistic output during his first sixty years (1475–1534) to reach a better understanding of his amazing architectural designs. That architectural ensemble seems so unique and startling, so unlikely and powerful, that its genesis still confounds many of us. This felt problem has led Brothers to try a fresh approach to exploring the reasons and methods behind Michelangelo's inventive results. She proposes that Michelangelo's architecture should be analyzed across disciplinary boundaries because common formal characteristics can be identified in his *disegni*—meaning both “drawings” and “designs”—for painting, sculpture, architecture, the decorative arts, and poetry. Brothers also focuses on Michelangelo's drawings as the primary artifacts for study because they reveal his creative process and his design methods, and thus the secrets of his “genius” as the creator of a new set of design rules.

In four chapters, organized chronologically, Michelangelo's methods for inventing designs are traced from their beginnings in his earliest figural works, through his initial use of architectural elements in Roman projects for Pope Julius II, to their further and final development in his Florentine projects for the Medici. And although Michelangelo's architectural career had scarcely begun by the time he left that city in 1534, Brothers sees Michelangelo's architectural design habits and techniques developing from his earliest youthful sculptural works and continuing in use throughout his life. For example, she argues that Michelangelo discovered unusual expressive opportunities by using ink washes and chalk in nontraditional ways and that he employed these techniques to generate his late Roman projects, such as San Giovanni dei Fiorentini and the Porta Pia (pp. 200–203).

Chapter 1 considers Michelangelo's early drawings of the human body and asks how he gained and used his

knowledge of the nude figure's components and structure. Between 1505 and 1515, during the development of the Battle of Cascina cartoons, the Julius II tomb designs, and the Sistine ceiling frescoes, Michelangelo generated a diverse assortment of figures by manipulating idealized bodies and body parts. The ceiling's *ignudi* figures, in particular, offer evidence that Michelangelo rotated, mirrored, twisted, stretched, enlarged, or turned a body to create variety out of a relatively limited set of initial poses. Michelangelo's drawing methods—whether they were conscious strategies, or habits generated without full deliberateness—resulted in works that seemed both inventive and stylistically consistent.

Michelangelo had created his vocabulary of the human form by drawing from life, copying ancient statuary, and studying his rivals' work. In Chapter 2, Brothers explains how his initial self-education in architectural form was gained through similar but strictly delimited studies of ancient and contemporary buildings. She convincingly demonstrates that Michelangelo took up Giuliano da Sangallo's open, anti-doctrinaire attitude to Roman antiquities. Unlike Giuliano and other High Renaissance architects who drew the ruins themselves, Michelangelo, however, chose to copy other architects' sketches, especially certain ones in the *Codex Coner* and Giuliano's *Codex Barberini*. Just as Michelangelo had memorized the human body so as to create a storehouse of idealized pieces, his earliest architectural sketches demonstrate that he copied classical details and incessantly redrew, isolated, and varied them to create an ahistorical “kit of parts” that was uniquely his own. And while “varying a classical form to arrive at a new one [was] a process typical of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century architecture . . .” (p. 73), Michelangelo approached the classical orders and their parts with unusual freedom from conventional norms.

In the last two chapters, Brothers traces the development of Michelangelo's designs in terms of his changing attitude to the figure and the frame. In Chapter 3, she analyzes the visual characteristics of figural/sculptural versus framing/architectural elements in the Sistine ceiling and the Julius tomb designs, viewing them as precursors to the transitional San Lorenzo facade designs and the more radical Medici Chapel projects. Although initially Michelangelo scarcely bothered to consider architecture as anything except a generic armature for figures, his sketches for these Roman projects suggest that he gradually began to question how the body could be

a frame, or vice versa—literally by using a herm, for example. Judging from the remaining sketches and the wooden model, the San Lorenzo facade project seems to have given Michelangelo the opportunity to focus on architecture without figures, and to devise an unusual “figureless frame [by] stretching, compression, scale shift, and displacement” of architectural elements (p. 122). Finally, at least in some of the project drawings for the Medici Chapel and its tombs, the differences between figure and frame dissolved: the elements apparently were developed simultaneously as more equal, interdependent, and—in the case of the architectural orders—abstract.

The final chapter proposes that Michelangelo resolved the frame/figure condition in the Laurentian Library designs, so that “the frame [became] the figure,” (p. 153) and the architecture became the subject. Since there were no figural sculptures in that project, the architecture itself became as complex and emotionally affecting as figures. In Brothers’ opinion, Michelangelo also was newly attentive, in this design, to “the body” as both a mechanism moving through as well as affected by space and its architectural details. She reads the library perceptually and viscerally using the principles of empathy, and argues that Michelangelo intended to impress visitors with the spaces’ physical intensity and sensibility of strangeness.

Readers interested in pondering how to identify “genius,” how drawing might support invention, and how precedents could play a role in the design process, will profit from a careful and critical reading of this stimulating book. When anyone chooses to study an individual of “genius”—such as Michelangelo—that artist’s unusually inventive output provides the primary materials to be investigated, but the underlying goal is to better understand the processes and methods that produced such amazing artifacts. Brothers effectively puts this goal in the foreground. By using a holistic approach focused on the evidence of his drawings, Brothers creates a unified, sweeping picture of Michelangelo’s artistic personality.

Brothers’ analysis is grounded in her wide knowledge of Roman and Florentine culture spanning the 200 years of the Italian Renaissance and in earlier Michelangelo scholarship. Her expertise in Giuliano da Sangallo, late fifteenth-century Florentine architecture, and the circa-1500 interpretation of Roman antiquities are displayed convincingly in this book. Highly scholarly yet smoothly readable, the text amply is supported by numerous full-page reproductions of Michelangelo’s drawings, photographs of his

completed projects, and carefully selected images of the work of his contemporaries, especially Sangallo. The book also includes an extensive bibliography and endnotes, and indices of the illustrated drawings by location and project, cross-referenced to Charles de Tolnay’s *Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo*.

The book’s text, captions, and endnotes, however, provide only minimal information to the reader about the external factors affecting Michelangelo and his projects, such as program, client, site, budget, structure, and construction. A reader wanting to consider the effects that these constraints might have had on Michelangelo’s designs will need to consult other sources for additional facts about who, what, and where; I consulted the text and the catalog entries in Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 2nd ed., Chicago, 1986. A reader who is not a Michelangelo scholar also might struggle to keep track of the sequence of events and artifacts. Dates are scarce and entirely missing from the figure captions describing specific drawings. This omission is problematic since the drawings constitute the primary source materials, and the author’s arguments depend on chronological determinism and causality.

This book is not balanced, nor is it meant to be: the author intends to investigate only selected realms of Michelangelo’s creative process. As such, rather than proposing a settled or complete account, Brothers re-opens and rigorously follows a fruitful, but at times questionable, mode of inquiry. Nevertheless, big ideas and detailed evidence about drawing are effectively presented in a book with a coherent structure and a convincing and well-organized set of multivalent and challenging claims. As ideas build up chapter by chapter, the reader will be persuaded that Michelangelo developed his design vocabulary over time and through incessant repetitive sketch studies. Far from creating a design in an instantaneous flash of “genius,” Michelangelo instead made a long series of incremental adjustments to a limited palette of prototypical models before arriving at an unusual architecture that became ever more idiosyncratic and powerfully evocative. By carefully retracing Michelangelo’s creative path, Brothers has provided a provocative vision of an artist, an oeuvre, a mass of historical and analytical material, and a set of issues which are of timeless interest and great importance.

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