

# LEONARDO, MICHELANGELO AND THE CENTURY OF GENIUS

Master Drawings from the British Museum

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## Drawing and the Century of Genius

Giorgio Vasari, the major art historian of the sixteenth century, wrote that at the beginning of his age art reached its highest peak; that, after centuries, the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture again equalled and even surpassed those of the ancients. To Vasari, the qualities of great art – grace, beauty, harmony, perfection and proper proportion – could be found in Italy in the work of the geniuses of his time: Michelangelo in particular, and also Leonardo, Raphael and Titian. This judgement found wide acceptance during the century and has shaped thinking since to such an extent that we cannot view this exhibition of drawings without some of Vasari's ideas, consciously or subconsciously, in our minds.

Vasari and his contemporaries saw what was termed *disegno*, or drawing, as central to the achievement of his century. (*Disegno* translates both as drawing specifically and also as “design”, or the ordering of compositions and shapes.) *Disegno*, he said, is “not other than a visible expression and declaration of our inner conception” put into practice with a hand “free and apt to draw and to express correctly . . . for when the intellect puts forth refined and judicious conceptions, the hand which has practised *disegno* for many years, exhibits the perfection and excellence of the arts as well as the knowledge of the artist” (*On Technique*, XV, preface to *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published 1550, revised and enlarged 1568).

Vasari continued the tradition started in the early Renaissance (for example, by Cennino Cennini in his *Book of Art*, V: “You begin with drawing”), that drawing was the “parent of the three arts” of architecture, sculpture and painting; a tradition totally accepted by the end of the sixteenth century: said Giovanni Battista Armenini in his *True Precepts of Painting*, IV, of 1587, “*disegno* is the light, the foundation and the support of the . . . arts”.

The study and prominence of drawing was centred in Tuscany and Rome. Vasari and others were concerned about the lack of “decorum” of the northern Europeans and the lack of serious draughtsmanship of even the northern Italians. Yet even these northerners saw and spoke of the value of *disegno*. Dürer for example, wrote that it was needful “for every artist to learn to draw well, for this is beyond measure serviceable in many arts and much depends thereon” (*Four Books on Human Proportion*, III, of 1528). In Venice, the traditional centre of the school of “colour versus drawing”, Carlo Ridolfi, in his *Wonders of Art* of 1648, quoted Titian as saying “it is not bright colours but good drawing that makes figures beautiful” and Tintoretto: “Beautiful colours are for sale in the shops of the Rialto, but good drawing can only be fetched from the casket of the artist's talent with patient study and sleepless nights, and it is understood and practised by few”.

The promotion of the elevated status of drawing was a quintessential sixteenth century activity. The idea of the role of drawing had greatly developed from the fifteenth century when writers like Leon Battista Alberti saw *disegno* only in practical terms, as did Piero della Francesca who wrote: “Painting consists of three principal parts, which we name drawing, measurement and colouring. By drawing we mean profiles and outlines which contain objects” (*Of the Perspective of Painting*, I, of c. 1480-90).

The change came in the early years of the sixteenth century: Baldassare Castiglione was the first to write in his *Book of the Courtier* of 1527, that both painting and sculpture derive from *disegno*, and Vasari was responsible for elevating it conceptually. His Venetian contemporaries Paolo Pini, in his *Dialogue on Painting* of 1548, and Ludovico Dolce, in his *Aretine* of 1557, also saw *disegno* as the equal with invention and colouring in importance to the arts. Federico Zuccaro, in his *Idea* of 1607, evoked a divine connection for *disegno* with his

suggested etymology of the word: *segno di Dio*, or "Sign of God".

Zuccaro divided drawing into *disegno interno*, or the intellectual or spiritual process, and *disegno esterno*, or the practical fulfilment of the idea. The practical side of drawing, of both technique and style, had been carefully watched and nurtured throughout the Renaissance and sixteenth century. There had been books on how to draw and paint since Cennini's *Book of Art* of the early fifteenth century and these were still used. Both Leonardo's and Vasari's volumes contained practical notes, and at the end of the century Armenini, Zuccaro and also Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, in his *Treatise* of 1584, added to the information available. Much of the early teaching was relevant and repeated in the sixteenth century. Cennini, for example, wrote that the artist should start by copying the great masters, "then you will find, if nature has granted you any imagination at all, that you will eventually acquire a style individual to yourself, and it cannot help being good; because your hand and your mind, being always accustomed to gather flowers, would ill know how to pluck thorns". With time the artist would draw from nature, "the best helm", added Cennini (*Book of Art*, XXVII and XXVIII).

However, the change from the careful drawing of the early Renaissance to the free ease and maturity of the High Renaissance and the sixteenth century was evident. Vasari articulated this clearly. In the fifteenth century he said there "was not the perfection of finish, because, although they made an arm round and a leg straight, the muscles in these were not revealed with that sweet and facile grace which hovers midway between the seen and the unseen, as is the case with the flesh of living figures . . . [These early drawings] were wanting in the delicacy that comes from making all figures light and graceful, particularly those of women and children, with the limbs true to nature, as in the case of men, but veiled with a plumpness and fleshiness that should not be awkward, as they are in nature, but refined by draughtsmanship and judgement" (*Lives*, Preface to Third Part). The early care and study was appreciated by the High Renaissance, but gradually the sketch, often using just impressionistic strokes, became more accepted. Leonardo recommended rapid sketching for some scenes, leaving the "working of the limbs not too much finished . . . which you will then be able at your leisure to finish as you please" (*Notebooks* ed. E. MacCurdy, 1945, II, p. 236).

The sixteenth century saw drawing as the conceptual and practical basis of the arts, but also implicitly saw it as the precursor of painting, sculpture and also architecture. Drawing was a means to an end, despite the recognition of its immediate, fresh beauty. Copies were made from other art pieces, from antiquity and from nature; sketches were used to develop an idea and more "finished" works were used to see how compositions for paintings would develop, both for the artist's and the patron's use. The squaring of a number of drawings here (nos. 13, 23, 44, 54 for example) show their express use for paintings. Only rarely are there examples of drawings valued explicitly for themselves: one instance is Raphael offering any of his drawings "of various types based on your Lordship's suggestion" to Baldassare Castiglione.

The writers of the sixteenth century watched with both pride and amazement the achievements of the early part of the century, followed by what they saw as the disintegration of classical standards to a looser, more subjective and personal style of the later part. It was a style based on the idea of the *bella maniera*, or beautiful manner, an ultimately self-conscious, internalised art denying outward stability and clarity — a style now called Mannerism. The "beautiful manner" became contorted, self-conscious, sometimes effete, and also often powerful and deeply emotional. The great public individuals of the early decades of the century became

the private beings of the later ones.

The awareness of the individual, which was a vital part of Renaissance thinking, and the concept of extraordinary talent, or genius, epitomised the feeling of the sixteenth century. The visual arts had had a long battle until the sixteenth century to be placed among the highest levels of cultural endeavour. The role of the critics had been very important in this with the inclusion in the early Renaissance of biographies of artists among those of "famous men", like Ghiberti's life of Brunelleschi, *Condivi*'s of Michelangelo and of course the work of Vasari. One related practice was the heightening of the argument of painting's value compared with sculpture, an argument Leonardo for one participated in at length. This in turn helped promote the relevancy of the cause of the makers of the visual image for the highest recognition.

At the beginning of the century Castiglione, who regularised much of the Renaissance view of the universal man and his many talents and roles, wrote that "anyone who can imitate [the Universe] deserves the highest praise". Leonardo, between discussing warfare, anatomy and flight in his *Notebooks*, started his chapter on painting with the words "How painting surpasses all human works by reason of the subtle possibilities which it contains"; and Michelangelo in conversation with Vittoria Colonna, as recorded by Francisco de Hollanda (in *Four Dialogues* of 1547-49), said "In Italy great princes as such are not held in honour or renown; it is a painter that they call divine". He himself, of course, was central to the notion, held by both his own and later generations, of the artist as divine: as written by Ariosto in his popular poem *Orlando Furioso* of 1532 (canto 23): "Michel più, che mortale, Angel Divino" (Michel more than mortal, divine Angel).

Michelangelo was lionised by all the writers, especially Vasari, but others also were isolated as "divine", as Dolce called Titian for example. The various levels of achievements of Raphael (who, said Dolce, outdid Michelangelo in painting), Michelangelo (who outdid all in sculpture) and others, were continually judged. Tintoretto, said Ridolfi, aspired to the draughtsmanship of Michelangelo and the colour of Titian.

They were the geniuses of the time. With the deaths of Leonardo and Raphael and the move away from classical harmony, order and proportion, the self concept and behaviour of artists and of "genius" itself took on a different note. As Saturn was argued to be the planet of creative genius (by the philosopher Marsilio Ficino for example) only the melancholic temperament associated with those ruled by this planet could lead to creative endeavour. The idea of the relationship of genius and madness, explored since Plato's time, became closely allied with the attitudes and ways of life of the artists of the later sixteenth century. The cult of "melancholic", eccentric behaviour for artists was established.

For the first time the visual arts were regarded as the equal of men's other achievements and the idea of the creative artist as genius was mooted and found favour; and central to the process leading to works of genius was the intellectual and practical process called drawing. Never before or since has drawing been so basic to a culture or has it embodied its ideas and achievements so clearly.

One aspect of old master drawing exhibitions which often raises questions is technique. All these works are on paper. The beginning of wide use of this material in Italy occurred only in the fifteenth century and had a great bearing on the concepts and style of the drawings produced, particularly in establishing the idea of a small image on a flat surface which allowed quick strokes.

Drawing with a pen is one of the oldest methods and much used in the Renaissance, as is evidenced by this exhibition where over the half the works use pen, either alone, or with a wash, and often with white highlights if on coloured paper — three of the four major drawing techniques discussed by Armenini. Armenini's fourth technique is red and black chalk and again the exhibition has a large proportion of drawings in the rougher, more sensual medium. Lesser used media are charcoal, as in the Tintoretto works, wash drawings — often used by Northern artists — and the stylus or metal point (the parent of the lead pencil) as in the Leonardo and Zuccaro pieces.

Pens were made of reeds or quills. Inks were variously made: brown inks used were acid inks made from a suspension of iron oxide in gallic acid, and bistre, made from soot. These two inks are hard to distinguish by eye. Black ink was made from lampblack, called carbon ink, or chimney soot. (Sepia, another brown ink, was not used until the late eighteenth century.) The sixteenth century, with pen drawings of great formal strength, facility and verve, marks the high point of the use of this medium.

Washes used were usually brown, and made from earth colours like ochre or bistre. Some blue indigo washes were used in Northern Italy. Chalks and charcoals were especially favoured by the Venetians, being sympathetic to the tonal boldness of their aesthetic. Red chalk, often called sanguine, was also widely used for its great richness and subtlety and exploited here not only by its masters like Andrea del Sarto, but also by Michelangelo in his central study of *Adam*, the awakening man, symbol of the Renaissance.

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