

FRIDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2007 EVENING STANDARD

The final word on a master?

Michelangelo

Franz Zellner, Christof Thoenes and Thomas Pöpper
Taschen, £120

BRIAN SEWELL

FOR SOME weeks I have anticipated with bated breath and salivating tongue a new book on Michelangelo, the biggest, the best, the most comprehensive — all his mighty works re-examined by three eminent German art historians. Announcement took the form of random pages of text and illustration, one plate of which, a new photograph of Giuliano de' Medici from the Medici tombs in San Lorenzo, was so astonishingly beautiful that I was almost seduced from my entrenched scorn of photographers and photography. If this is typical of the book, I thought, then I have died and gone to heaven.

I now have the book, and am alive. A whisker short of 18 x 12 inches and three thick, it weighs some 20lbs. I shall never read it — to do so requires the support of a biblical lectern and the strength to stand for days in rapt concentration, as I do now, back bent, to write and read at the same time. Weight and bulk are not its only flaws — worse is its guttering of plates; though many are folding and can be flattened on a table, at least as many, conventionally bound, cannot; these, covering two pages, are appallingly distorted as their inner inches curve steeply into the stitching of the spine, the innermost inch or so completely lost. Many of these cases are of details — Jonah, for example, the final magnificent figure of the Sistine Ceiling, baroque in energy and pose, the clearest demonstration of how sculptural Michelangelo's painting had become compared with Zachariah, the first of the Prophets to be painted, is so sliced through as to destroy our understanding of his leaning pose and his relationship both to the surrounding architecture and the narrative above. As for these nine narratives, all are cut through the dead centre of their carefully constructed compositions.

The book nevertheless has wonderful details of single figures and heads, often, as with the Prophets and Sybils, in the context of their thrones and immediate architecture; the nude youths are treated less sumptuously only as supporting adjuncts to the narratives. With *The Last Judgement*, guttering is again the problem, disrupting groups of naked figures that Michelangelo conceived as self-contained within the larger whole.

The text is divided into a continuous narrative of 10 chapters dealing with the life and work, and separate catalogues of sculpture, painting and architecture; all these are of scrupulous seriousness, diligent in recognition of the ideas and interpretations of other scholars but by no means the last words — much more importance should have been given to the unfinished *St Matthew* of 1506, of which the authors' risible conclusion is only that it represents "Michelangelo's early approach to sculpture". Such a banal conclusion — under that very heading — ends almost every catalogue note. Much more should have been said about the illusionist architecture of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's unprecedented (except by classical examples of which he cannot have known) invention in turning a plain barrel vault into the decorated flat ceiling of a basilica. There should be more about his collaboration with assistants. I could go on ... And I fervently dispute the dismissal as copies of many of Michelangelo's drawings, concluding from the authors' conclusions that they have no knowledge of the practice of drawing in the Renaissance and no experience of this branch of connoisseurship.

In spite of all these flaws, I am glad to have the book. At £120 it is not unreasonable — there are 767 of these vast pages to turn and perhaps as many illustrations (they are not numbered) but every buyer should check his copy before he takes it home, for mine, though packed in a box within a bigger box, with two membranes of stout plastic, shows clear evidence of damp storage, and most of its pages were to some extent glued at the fore-edge and had to be separated with great care.