



**Frank Zollner, Christof Thoenes and Thomas Popper
Michelangelo:
Complete Works
Taschen, 2007, £120**

Just how colossal can art books grow before they defeat the most valiant human attempts to read them? The question leapt into my mind when a truly immense parcel arrived at my house. Even the robust delivery man looked pale as he

struggled to hand it over, and the parcel's sheer weight made me imagine that it contained a sculpture rather than a book.

I was not far wrong. Published by the fearless Benedikt Taschen, who awards himself a special mention on the title page, this mighty volume cries out to be displayed on a sturdy plinth in a museum. It certainly cannot be held in a reader's hands, and I was unable to rest it on my lap for more than a few minutes. Most coffee tables would bend or snap under the strain of supporting such an overwhelming behemoth.

Once I found a safe berth for it on the sofa, however, the allure of such a book became clear. After all, Michelangelo himself was never afraid of tackling the most superhuman commissions. Nor did he balk at taking on architectural projects of daunting dimensions, alongside his equally epic work as a sculptor, painter and draughtsman. Almost 90 when he died, this fecund and feisty individual never stopped breaking the boundaries. Even in the final decade of his life, he revolutionised carving by discovering, in the pared-down *Rondanini Pietà*, a new expressive urgency which speaks directly to us now.

Frank Zollner claims that he and his co-authors have tried here, 'for the first time, to present Michelangelo's achievements...in a truly comprehensive fashion in words and images'. They certainly succeed in conveying the extraordinary breadth and multiplicity of Michelangelo's work. Nor do they neglect the more personal aspects of an often irascible man who could be difficult to deal with.

In the end, though, the book's success derives principally from its illustrations. Not so much the sculpture: the *Rondanini Pietà* has been photographed more powerfully in other publications. But the Sistine Chapel paintings come alive with astonishing forcefulness here. Michelangelo never intended them to be seen in the close-up images presented on page after enormous page. He would, nevertheless, have relished the visceral potency of these colour plates. Their impact is immediate, and they repay the most prolonged scrutiny as well.

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