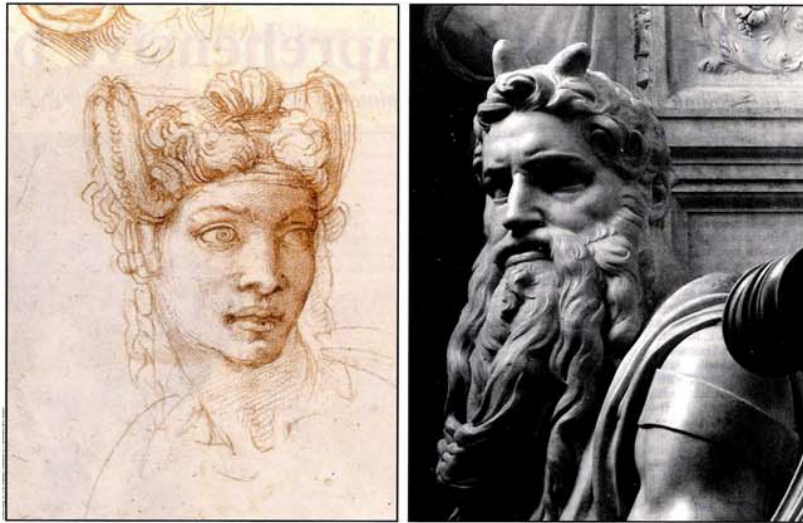


## Michelangelo studies

# “The art-historical equivalent of a bloodbath”

This lavish coffee-table book refuses to recognise the authenticity of three-quarters of the artist's drawings



Michelangelo (“partly”), *Two studies of heads* (detail), 1525–28; Michelangelo, *Moses* (detail), around 1513–16 and 1542

Since Michelangelo is universally acknowledged to be a giant among artists, it seems only right and proper that Taschen Books should have accorded him a monster of a book. The illustrations are extensive and generally excellent, with numerous details, and they are surely its principal appeal. It does not contain all that much in the way of text, but what there is is generally unobjectionable to the point of being bland, except when it comes to the section on figural drawings, which is the art-historical equivalent of a bloodbath.

The result is that the generally accepted corpus of between 700 and 800 Michelangelo drawings (counting rectos and versos separately) is reduced to around 200. The author of this section, Thomas Pöpper, explains that “each attribution has been weighed up again and again in a lengthy process of review”, but also that “it is not possible to explain how this was done in each case.” As a matter of fact, the reasoning behind several hundred individual thumbs down is not explained in a single case, although we are promised “an in-depth discussion of this topic elsewhere”.

For the time being, what the reader is given is a splendidly illustrated, all-colour anthology of drawings variously categorised as “Michelangelo”, “Michelangelo (partly)”, “Michelangelo (?)”, “Michelangelo (copy?)”, “Michelangelo (workshop)”, and “after Michelangelo”. To this is

added an extremely useful list of all the generally accepted Michelangelo sheets, together with Dr Pöpper’s *ex cathedra* verdict on their status. Oddly enough, its main achievement was to make me yearn nostalgically for Alexander Perrig’s no less minimalist take on the drawings in his *Michelangelo’s Drawings: The Science of Attribution* (1991) and elsewhere, where there is at least some attempt to assign the rejected sheets to other hands. Here, conversely, the big idea is that a number of drawings that appear to be preparatory studies for the Sistine ceiling “prove upon closer inspection chiefly to be either contemporaneous copies combining motifs from various lost originals (so-called anthology sheets) or early copies after the finished fresco, these latter occasionally deliberately trying to pass themselves off as original sketches”. Such masterpieces as the Metropolitan’s *Libyan Sibyl* (anthology sheet) and the British Museum’s *Adam* (early deception) are notable victims of this pincer movement.

Turning the pages of reproductions is a surreal experience, as some of the most beautiful drawings ever made are summarily dismissed. Life would, of course, be simpler if the evidence of handwriting, watermarks, provenance and the like could prove a drawing was by Michelangelo (or anyone else, for that matter), but ultimately we must form a view by using our eyes. Having said that, there are some extraordinary casualties: the presentation drawing of

Cleopatra in the Casa Buonarroti has been described by Michael Hirst as “one of the most securely documented [drawings by Michelangelo] we possess”, and yet here it is turned down like a bedspread. Perrig accepted both that Michelangelo gave Tommaso de’ Cavalieri a drawing of Cleopatra and that this must be

the drawing of Cleopatra that Cavalieri, in turn, gave to Cosimo de’ Medici during Michelangelo’s lifetime, but contended that Cavalieri had fobbed the Duke off with a copy he drew himself and kept the original (which has presumably since disappeared). One imagines Cosimo would not have been inordinately amused the drawing of Cleopatra that Cavalieri, in turn, gave to Cosimo de’ Medici during Michelangelo’s lifetime, but contended that Cavalieri had fobbed the Duke off with a copy he drew himself and kept the original (which has presumably since disappeared). One imagines Cosimo would not have been inordinately amused horribly let down if he simply parrots the Perrig line.

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□ Frank Zöllner, Christof Thoenes and Thomas Pöpper, *Michelangelo: Complete Works* (Taschen Books), 768 pp, £120, \$200, €150 (hb) ISBN 9783822830550