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Michelangelo and Paper as Palimpsest: a book project

Pieces of paper have a memory. They register subtle changes that can reveal their history. Much more substantial than simple two-dimensional supports without volume, they occupy a physical space that records gestures and manipulations. Cuts, folds, and scratches, even when hidden, leave traces that an attentive eye, or simple new technologies, can still recover. Observing Michelangelo's mark-making through a close investigation of his documents on paper can shed light on a mode of operating that structured not only the most intimate aspects of his relationship with physical objects, but also his broader vision of the world.

It is very well known that Michelangelo used and reused his papers during his long life as both a functional system for recording and archiving, and an organic resource to serve as an aid to his creations. By contrast, the ways in which the artist took full advantage of the versatility of paper and how he handled his sheets over the course of decades have received relatively little attention. The book *Michelangelo and paper as palimpsests* will investigate Michelangelo's graphic activity, reconstructing it through original research carried out in the most important collections in Italy, Europe and the United State.

Despite the fact that a large number of drawings and letters are no longer extant (Michelangelo periodically destroyed them), almost six hundred drawings and about fifteen hundred paper documents still survive today. In particular, I have extensively analyzed Michelangelo's drawings and paper documents held at the Fondazione Casa Buonarroti in Florence. The Institution has the largest nucleus of Michelangelo drawings in existence (around 200 architectural sheets and 100 figurative drawings).

It also houses an impressive archive of documents pertaining to Michelangelo, the *Archivio Buonarroti*, which includes, among other things, thirteen large volumes containing hundreds of documents kept by Michelangelo, the majority of which are autographs: letters sent and received by the artist, his *ricordi* or memos, the contracts with patrons and institutions, and an extraordinary number of poetical works, such as *rime*, sonnets, madrigals, epitaphs, and other fragments. Many of those sheets also

contain a large number of drawings and sketches of very different kinds. A vast archipelago of paper fragments, arduous to navigate.

I have also investigated Michelangelo's graphic activity, documenting it through the study of drawings from major Italian, European and American collections.

Research on these widely scattered materials is essential to gain a more global and comprehensive vision of Michelangelo's works on paper, especially because the drawings now in foreign collections reached their modern repositories mainly as a result of the fragmentation, sale and dispersion of the original nucleus of the Casa Buonarroti. Widening my search to include sheets of paper in Italian, European and American collections also enables a more systematic classification of extant Michelangelo's documents according to their principal physical and functional characteristics.

Archaeology of the page

My examinations pay special attention to the various techniques of preparing a sheet in the workshop (smoothing, trimming) whether according to the type of graphic instrument to be used on it (blind stylus, chalk, pen and ink, ruler) or the type of drawing to be executed (sketches, studies, survey drawings, templates, modelli, demonstration drawings, presentation drawings). My observations have also shed light on the preparation of the paper that Michelangelo frequently used for writing. Such analyses clarify the chronological sequence of ideas and sketches jotted down on the same page, often in a seemingly chaotic manner. In several cases, I have identified also the procedures of layout, consultation and archiving of the papers according to the folding, sorting, binding, gluing, stringing, cutting and tearing that Michelangelo's papers underwent. Although less frequently, I have tried to explain how the sheets were later reused and modified, and to determine with more accuracy whether these manipulations were the result of Michelangelo's intervention, or that of later heirs or collectors, as a result of a more recent process of fragmentation, display and conservation. The aim of this methodology is to develop an innovative approach focused on analyzing these documents on paper in terms of their production, use, and purposes. The successful application of this method is demonstrated in full in the last chapter of the book, dedicated to the analysis of the drawings for the fortification of Florence.

My collaboration with the graphic designer Leonardo Pili has profoundly influenced my study of Michelangelo's *œuvre* on paper. His expertise on enhanced imaging, manipulation, and rendering of visual materials, as well as his remarkable capability to virtually present the results of my research, had a great impact on the way I tackled the material, redirecting my goals and steering my interests. Since then, digital visualization and imaging technics became an integral part of my analytical approach.

I consider my analysis of Michelangelo's drawings suitable for an array of Renaissance artists whose graphic *œuvres* present similar characteristics, such as variety quality and format of sheets, problems in attribution between master and assistants, fragmentation of sheets, chaotic *mise-en-page*. Pertinent examples are works by Raffaeallo, Baldassarre Peruzzi, Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane, Andrea Palladio, or Jacopo Tintoretto.

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