
The Strange Case of the Young Michelangelo

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OVER HALF a millennium after Michelangelo achieved great fame and glory, the early development of the artist who fashioned such monumental works as the statue of David, the Sistine ceiling decoration, and the dome of St. Peter's still remains something of a mystery.¹

Although Michelangelo might have been active as early as the late 1480s, when he was with Ghirlandaio, it was not until after he worked under the patronage of the Medici and after he travelled, in 1496, to Rome—where he carved his spectacular *Bacchus*, followed by his even more amazing *Pietà* a few years later—that he achieved a kind of unprecedented distinction. We might even go so far as to say that it was only then, in the mid-to-late nineties, that Michelangelo became the “Michelangelo” who would come to be so widely admired—indeed, regarded with awe.

The artist who, in the first eight to ten years of his activity, painted or carved a variety of works attributed to him either by his sixteenth-century biographers or by modern scholars does not appear by any stretch of the imagination to be extraordinary. He was no child prodigy. Even when Lorenzo *il Magnifico* was said to have discovered Michelangelo working on the marble head of a Faun in the Medici gardens—he was around fifteen at the time—praise was qualified. Lorenzo did not simply marvel at the work but rather he marveled how remarkable the work was for one so young. You could say that Michelangelo showed great promise.

We might see in one of Michelangelo's first works a facial expression, posture, or other feature that makes us think ahead to his later greater works; or vice versa, something in the later works recalls an aspect of the early. No matter.

Those pieces of Michelangelo's early years are aesthetically unexceptional. They take on special interest mostly because they are seen as the efforts of an artist who developed into greatness. Had Michelangelo died at the age of twenty in 1495, he would be forgotten today or overlooked. The twenty-year-old Michelangelo was a minor figure in the history of art.

No matter which combination of works is attributed to the young artist (and there is plenty of controversy), none of these works can be seen as great art. And in truth, it does not appear that Michelangelo enthusiasts have ever seriously made the case that any of the early works attributed are major works, whatever their other, limited virtues might be. Moreover, as I've adverted, the matter of attribution is unsettled.

When we talk about these early works, we are considering the following: the copy of Schongauer's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* in the Kimbell Art Museum; the *Madonna of the Steps* and the *Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs* (both in the Casa Buonarroti); the unfinished *Madonna and Child with Saint John and Angels* in the National Gallery in London; the *Archer* from the Cultural Services Building of the French Embassy in New York; the cluster of figures (an angel, Saint Proculus, and Saint Petronius) in the Basilica of San Domenico in Bologna; and the *Crucifix* in Santo Spirito in Florence.

There is no point in considering here the lost works attributed to Michelangelo by his sixteenth-century biographers, since we do not know very much about them: for example, the *Cupid* that was buried in Rome and was good enough to trick people into believing it was an ancient work. Besides, it is hard to argue that a skillful forgery is a masterpiece, especially since it is a copy, not an original design.

Further, in dealing with Michelangelo's early works, I will offer a few suggestions that will hint at my predisposition to accept or reject an attribution. But such suggestions are by no means conclusive, and so I remain in many cases in a state of dubitation.

Three works loosely associated with Michelangelo in the past have recently received a great deal of attention: the *Saint Anthony* in Texas, the London *Madonna and Child*, and the *Archer* in New York. Many believe that the *Crucifix* from Santo Spirito attributed to Michelangelo by his sixteenth-century biographers is a work from the artist's early years. In recent years, there have been exhibitions, catalogues, and conferences in which all these attributions have been vigorously argued. Those who accept the ascriptions of some or all of these works depend on their knowledge of Michelangelo, their skills as connoisseurs, and their sensibilities; those who deny them depend on the same virtues.

There are, for example, some critics who think the *Archer* in New York a beautiful work; others (whose views, I think, have not been explored sufficiently) who think the figure un-gainly. Both parties feel so strongly that they are indignant at the suggestion that they might be wrong. How can the *Archer* possibly *not* be by Michelangelo? How can the *Archer* possibly *be* by Michelangelo?

Both those in support and those opposed are speculating, presenting hypotheses, not facts. Even when there are large majorities in favor of a specific assignment, we cannot be entirely sure that it is correct.

In order to raise a few questions, I am going to accept all of the attributions to Michelangelo. This will not please the skeptics. But I want for the moment not to worry about whether a work is by Michelangelo or not, but to suggest that in a sense that does not matter, since none of the works under discussion is what one might speak of as a major work of art. This will perhaps offend many of those in support of the attributions. So be it. We will see, above all, that what is satisfying to some about these works is the way they conform to our understanding of the influences on Michelangelo.

The *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, said to be copied from Schongauer, is often thought to be the painting that Condivi mentions in his life of the artist, the painting undertaken by the boy artist during his time with Ghirlandaio. This is not an

unreasonable assumption. Yet the question remains, Is *this* that painting? It fits neatly into the story as a late fifteenth-century work with a Ghirlandaio-like landscape. But was the young Michelangelo the only artist to make such a copy from Schongauer? Is *this* the picture mentioned by Condivi? Maybe. But even if it is, it is (again) a copy, not an original invention. (The addition of fish scales to one of the demons is scarcely a powerful innovation.) A distinguished conservator has remarked that the picture is technically of very high quality and that this level of skill supports the attribution. Does it? One might object that there were numerous artists in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century with considerable technical skill. And from another point of view, this would perhaps not matter to the highly accomplished Michelangelo scholar who remarked of the painting that if it were by Michelangelo, he would be “disappointed.”

During the period when Michelangelo was in the Medici sculpture garden, he carved the *Madonna of the Steps*. That Vasari first made this assertion in 1568 has puzzled commentators from time to time. Why did Condivi not mention it in 1553? On occasion, the attribution of the relief has been questioned, though even if we do not pursue these doubts, we find that what we are dealing with is a kind of “school piece” in the manner of Donatello. It is nothing out of the ordinary; indeed, it is not nearly as subtle as Donatello’s own images of this kind, for example, the *Shaw Madonna*. If by Michelangelo, it is an example of the fifteen-year-old artist learning to carve in the manner of the great fifteenth-century master.

Also assigned to Michelangelo’s stint in the Medici gardens, *The Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs* is the most problematic of all the early works. It is a work of considerable ambition in its attempt to render a complex battle scene *all’antica*; several of the figures, it has been noted, are weak, but these deficiencies do not detract from the overall ambition of the work.

There is, though, a question here as to what we are looking at. Long ago, Roberto Longhi suggested a later date than 1490–92, given both ambition and accomplishment. Schol-

ars have pursued the implications of Longhi's suggestion by observing that Michelangelo worked on the relief at different times, and this indeed suggests the possibility that what we are looking at has a lot to do with Michelangelo at a period later than 1490–92.

There is a further puzzle. Condivi reports that when Michelangelo pondered this work in old age, he thought he was a better sculptor in his youth than in his maturity. Was Michelangelo here encouraging us, through Condivi, to think of him as a youthful prodigy? Was he exhibiting false modesty? As if rephrasing Condivi, however, Vasari suggests that Michelangelo's relief seems more the work of a mature rather than of a young artist.

Many scholars think the battle relief unfinished. Something unfinished is often thought to be less than perfect. Did Michelangelo leave off work on the relief unsuccessfully? Or, given his entire oeuvre, did he not delight in the effect of the *non finito*? Despite their best efforts, critics have never convincingly established that Michelangelo disliked the effect of the *non finito* and planned to polish all of his figures. Since so many of his works are partially unfinished, even when portions of them are highly polished, one can even make the case that many of these works were, paradoxically, finished even when unfinished. Although Michelangelo may have thought of the battle relief as in some sense unfinished, it does not follow that he would have brought all of the figures to a high polish or separated them from the background plane out of which they emerge and into which they project.

Critics see the influence on Michelangelo of Bertoldo, who presided over the Medici gardens. A few figures of Michelangelo's battle might well be echoes of comparable details in the bronze battle relief by Bertoldo, which was in the Medici palace where Michelangelo presumably saw it. But this observation obscures the fact that whereas Bertoldo's bronze was based on an original clay model, Michelangelo's work was carved out of marble. This difference of technique and its consequent aesthetic needs to be stressed.

Since Bertoldo's figures are all rendered in front of the background plane of the relief, while Michelangelo's relief shows figures both emerging from and projecting into that same plane—almost as if coming into being out of stone before our eyes, or receding from our view—one might well see Michelangelo's relief as a critique of Bertoldo's.

The unfinished *Madonna and Child* in the National Gallery, London, is another work that some scholars have recently focused on as Michelangelo's. The ascription to Michelangelo goes back at least as far as 1700, but it was only after the Manchester exhibition of 1857 that it received any sort of public recognition. The attribution, it is true, was accepted from time to time over the years; yet one wonders why so many scholars either ignored or doubted the assignment to Michelangelo? I would suggest that the answer lies in the simple fact that the painting is not remarkable, and scholars could not easily link it to the work of a great genius. And so they ignored it, even when it had affinities with Michelangelo's other works: for example, the suggestive similarity between the figure of Saint John and the figure of Jesus in the *Bruges Madonna*—not that such a connection proves anything definitively. The style of the work fits nicely with that of Ghirlandaio and, for that matter, with the style of Michelangelo's friend Granacci. One can therefore make a case for placing the work in Michelangelo's oeuvre; but again, I would insist that it does not follow from such associations that the painting is *in fact* by Michelangelo. The attribution is still open to debate. Yet the painting is not a truly impressive work. Those who ignored it for so long would seem to have implicitly agreed.

Michelangelo's work in Bologna is universally accepted. But the three sculptures, the angel, Petronius, and Proculus, although competently carved, are undistinguished. They are exercises in the style of other artists, Niccolò dell'Arca and Iacopo della Quercia, much as the *Madonna of the Steps* matches the style of Donatello. Michelangelo would never have gained status as a Ninja Turtle on the basis of such

work as that in Bologna. The conservative style of these figures, carved in conformity with what was already done on the *Arca* of San Domenico, is not necessarily surprising. Alternatively, one can look at the statues as remarkably successful inasmuch as they fit the ensemble of the *Arca* established by the artists who came before Michelangelo, though this success is not of the highest order. Praising Michelangelo for not being disruptive is scarcely high praise.

Even as late as the next decade (in other words, after the *Pietà*), when Michelangelo carved several figures for the Piccolomini monument in the Cathedral of Siena, he made works that were so much in the manner of another sculptor, again Donatello, that there is little of the artist himself in the work. Well-carved, Michelangelo's saints are here decidedly derivative. However, one can reasonably praise the intelligence with which Michelangelo follows the example of Donatello in his figures. Even so, he is confined by the previously defined terms of the project and is thus unable to work with the freedom that we find in the mature works, where his own inventive powers are more manifest. Not surprisingly, the Siena figures are little known to those who are not specialists in Renaissance art. They are not truly remarkable in the way that Michelangelo's greatest works are.

In fact, what one might say is that there are also various moments in his later work when Michelangelo is scarcely "Michelangelo." Much has been made, for example, of the *David/Apollo* in the Bargello, which has been shown more than once in recent years in the United States with great hype. Even so, hype does not transform competent art into great art. Although some critics admire the statue, it not surprisingly occupies a minor place in the writing about Michelangelo. Few consider it a work of great power. Here, as elsewhere, we are dealing with matters of taste that cannot be easily adjudicated. We all know in such matters that our own aesthetic judgments are impeccable.

One of the more intriguing stories of attribution here pertains to the marble *Archer* in New York. There is a long his-

tory of writing that associated the work, but only loosely, with Michelangelo. Lately, the attribution has been vigorously argued and defended, in part because of the relief's association with Bertoldo. One respectable critic even wondered if the sculpture was by Bertoldo, even though the latter worked primarily in bronze and stucco. Those supporting the attribution have also not satisfactorily explained the proportions of the broken figure, by which I mean its bizarre elongation. No wonder some have wondered if the work were not an example of later sixteenth-century Mannerism. As I have said, these doubts can too easily be conveniently dismissed or ignored.

Finally, there is the controversial *Crucifix* in wood at Santo Spirito thought to be the work mentioned by Michelangelo's sixteenth-century biographers, but only noticed less than fifty years ago. The attribution was once hotly debated, but recently more and more critics have been inclined to accept it. The androgynous character of the figure can be seen in relation to the more fully developed softness of the *Bacchus*, but the figures—in different media, wood and marble—are also very different in their proportions. The figure of Jesus, which recalls the work of Benedetto da Maiano (whose influence on Michelangelo has traditionally been overlooked or underestimated), scarcely fits with our sense of Michelangelo's notion of the human body and with the story that the prior of the church gave Michelangelo access to cadavers. The body of Jesus in the wooden *Crucifix* is devoid of the musculature we associate with Michelangelo's art. If it is by Michelangelo, it is anomalous. Moreover, when compared to the other sculptures of the *Crucifix* carved by Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Pollaiuolo, among others, it is undistinguished. No wonder nobody paid much attention to it over the centuries before its "rediscovery."

There is one neglected aspect of the Santo Spirito *Crucifix* that is worth considering. The artist has made the figure of Jesus, both his face and body, look remarkably young, almost boyish. I know of no other *Crucifix* of the period that presents such a radically young figure of Jesus. One might

say that the extreme, unorthodox rendering of Jesus' youthfulness heightens our sense of his vulnerability upon the Cross. We might recall here the way in which Michelangelo rendered the figure of Mary in his *Pietà* as strikingly youthful—so much so that his biographers attempted to defend this unorthodox rendering. The comparison of radically exceptional youthful figures in *Crucifix* and *Pietà* is, though suggestive, inconclusive—nothing more.

If all or most of the works discussed above are by Michelangelo, they demonstrate that Michelangelo's beginnings were either very modest in their experimental approach to art or restricted by circumstances; that his work was conservative in character; and that his paintings and sculptures were made in conformity to the styles of others: Donatello, Bertoldo, Ghirlandaio, Granacci, Niccolò dell'Arca, Iacopo della Quercia, and Benedetto da Maiano. The battle relief stands out, as I have observed, in its boldness, but that may have to do in part with the fact that, though originally datable from the Laurentian period of 1490–92, what we see may, to a considerable degree, be the result of later interventions.

What distinguishes Michelangelo's great works such as the *Pietà* from his early experiments is the manner in which the former absorb or assimilate past art. Whereas the sources of the early art are conspicuous, the influences on the *Pietà* vanish within the work. Michelangelo's Jesus is based on the type employed by Verrocchio, and his youthful Mary is an idealized type in a tradition that extends from Donatello to Antonio Rossellino, Desiderio da Settignano and Benedetto da Maiano. The sculptural beauty of Michelangelo's body of Jesus also has close ties to the highly polished sculptural forms of Perugino and Botticelli. The mature Michelangelo transcends his sources, which are so thoroughly assimilated that they go unobserved. In the *Pietà*, Michelangelo achieves *una singolarità*.

When we read Vasari's life of Michelangelo, we discover that it is only with his description of the *Bacchus*, a work of remarkable virtuosity, that his critical powers begin to swell as he writes a lengthy celebration of the sculpture. Yes,

Vasari writes with great hyperbole about Lorenzo's discovery of Michelangelo, and, yes, he makes much of Michelangelo's forgery of an ancient *Cupid*; but these accounts do not match the enthusiasm he understandably demonstrates when he celebrates the beauty of the *Bacchus*. That work was Michelangelo's first unqualified great work of art, and it was followed soon thereafter by the *Pietà*, which Vasari praises with the kind of rhetorical brilliance we find in his subsequent encomia to the *David*, the Sistine ceiling, the Medici Chapel, and the artist's other great works.

It was only when Michelangelo went to Rome, almost ten years after his putative earliest work, that he truly became the "Michelangelo" so greatly admired in the writing of Vasari and by those who came after him. The various controversies surrounding the attributions of relatively modest works to the young Michelangelo are a distraction. They prevent us from appreciating sufficiently the relatively modest origins of one of the greatest figures in the history of art. Our image of the young Michelangelo depends, we might say, on the aura effect. When we ponder those works considered to be his earliest paintings and sculptures, we project back onto them what we know about the later works made during Michelangelo's full maturity. How the sculptor and painter who made relatively modest works in his first years came to be the author of the *Pietà*, the *David*, and the Sistine ceiling frescoes still remains a mystery.

NOTE

1. All of the early works discussed here are illustrated in *Giovinezza di Michelangelo*, ed. Kathleen Weill-Garris Brandt (Florence 1999). I have profited greatly from the observations of Bruce Boucher, David Cast, Ralph Lieberman, Steven Ostrow, David Summers, and William Wallace. None of these individuals should be held responsible for the opinions and judgements in this essay.