

The British Museum

Michelangelo: the last decades | Photo Credit & Caption Sheet

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), Epifania. Black chalk on paper, about 1550-53. © The Trustees of the British Museum. *Funding for the conservation of the Epifania was generously provided through a grant from the Bank of America Art Conservation Project.*

This gigantic drawing, executed on twenty-six sheets of paper, was made as a cartoon: a full-scale blueprint for a work of art, probably a panel picture. Michelangelo's drawing was turned into a painting by his pupil and early biographer Ascanio Condivi. Both works are traditionally called 'Epifania', in reference to the three Magi, but their iconography remains elusive.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), the punishment of Tityus. Black chalk on paper, 1532. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2024

As punishment for his attempted rape of the goddess Leto, the giant Tityus was condemned to have his liver devoured daily by a vulture (replaced here by an eagle). This is one of a series of exquisite drawings, based on classical mythology with moral messages, which Michelangelo made as gifts for his young friend Tommaso de' Cavalieri. With its variety of finish, centred on Tityus' meticulously executed body, it is a demonstration of Michelangelo's draughtsmanship at its most refined.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), the fall of Phaeton. Black chalk, over stylus underdrawing, on paper, about 1533. © The Trustees of the British Museum

The arrogant Phaeton, son of the sun-god Helios, falls from his father's chariot after losing control. Zeus aims a thunderbolt from the top of the drawing while, below, Phaeton's weeping sisters are transformed into trees. This is a preparatory study for one of the highly finished drawings Michelangelo made for his young friend Tommaso de' Cavalieri, for whom he nurtured a deep platonic passion. A note at the bottom, in the artist's hand, asks Tommaso to let Michelangelo know what he thinks of the design.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), study for the 'Last Judgment'. Black chalk on paper, about 1534–36. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Michelangelo made numerous preparatory drawings for his fresco of the 'Last Judgment', as he had to be satisfied with the composition before beginning to paint on the wet plaster. This powerful drawing displays his continuing fascination with the human form and shows off his ability to depict the body in dramatic poses. This man, braced on bent arms, appears as one of the souls rising from their tombs at the bottom of the finished fresco.

Marcello Venusti (about 1512–79), 'The Purification of the Temple'. Oil on wood, about 1550. © The National Gallery, London. This painting, by Michelangelo's collaborator Marcello Venusti, is based on Michelangelo's own drawings. Michelangelo conceived the figures in the shape of a lunette (a crescent), before Venusti adapted the designs for an upright painting in which the group appear before dramatic twisting columns intended to evoke the Temple in Jerusalem.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), Crucifixion between the Virgin and St John. Black chalk and white lead on paper, about 1555–64. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Among Michelangelo's most moving, intimate expressions of faith is a group of drawings of the Crucifixion, probably made over an extended period of time during the last 10 years of his life. These works show the elderly artist using the act of drawing as a means of spiritual meditation – making variations on a single theme to explore his feelings about mortality, sacrifice, faith and redemption.

Michelangelo - Angels (Last Judgement study) © The Trustees of the British Museum

Study of an angel and other figures for the Last Judgement, c. 1534-6. Black chalk on paper. 40.4 x 27cm.

Michelangelo - Christ on the Cross © The Trustees of the British Museum

Christ on the Cross; flanked by two lamenting angels, a skull at the base. c. 1543. Black chalk on paper. 36.8 x 26.8cm.

Michelangelo - Pietà © The Trustees of the British Museum

c. 1535. Black chalk on paper. 28.1 x 26.8 cm

Michelangelo - Study For The Purification of the Temple © The Trustees of the British Museum

C. 1550. Black chalk on paper. 17.8 x 37.2 cm.

Michelangelo - the fall of Phaeton © The Trustees of the British Museum

The Fall of Phaeton; the four horses and chariot tumbling, with Jupiter above, and four nude figures below. 1533. Black chalk over stylus underdrawing on paper. 31.2 x 21.5cm

Michelangelo - The Risen Christ © The Trustees of the British Museum

C 1532-3. Black chalk on paper 40.5 x 26.9cm

Michelangelo - The Risen Christ (2) © The Trustees of the British Museum

c. 1532. Black chalk on paper. 40.5 x 26.9cm.

Michelangelo - Virgin Annunciate © The Trustees of the British Museum

The Virgin Annunciate: whole-length, half-kneeling turned to right, with one hand on a book. C. 1542-7
Black chalk.

Giulio Bonasone, print of the Last Judgment © The Trustees of the British Museum

The Last Judgement, after Michelangelo. late 1540s. Engraving

Daniele da Volterra, Cartoon for a portrait of Michelangelo © Telyers Museum, Harlem, the Netherlands

1550-55, Leadpoint and black chalk, 295 x 219 mm

This portrait shows Michelangelo when he was more than seventy years old. The sheet served as a one-to-one model for the head of one of the apostles in Daniele's Ascension of the Virgin fresco on the altar wall of the Cappella della Rovere in Santissima Trinità dei Monti in Rome.