

In Williamsburg, a Season of Art from Italy

BY HÉLOÏSE B. LEVIT



From now through March 2014, more than 70 institutions across the United States are celebrating *The Year of Italian Culture* with special exhibitions and installations. Of course, a museum cannot choose much better than Michelangelo (1475-1564) when considering Italian artists to highlight. At the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., for example, this master's marble sculpture of David-Apollo has been loaned by Florence's Museo Nazionale del Bargello and remains on view there through March 3.

Though Williamsburg, Virginia, is more usually associated with colonial Americana, there the College of William and Mary's Muscarelle Museum of Art harbors not one, but two, Michelangelo experts — director Aaron De Groft and chief curator John T. Spike. (Once a W&M student himself, De Groft was mentored by the Renaissance and Baroque art scholar Miles Chappell, who is now professor emeritus there.) Fortunately, they all enjoy a warm relationship with Florence's Casa Buonarroti, the family home of Michelangelo and the greatest repository of his drawings and letters. This friendship and their expertise have enabled the Muscarelle to borrow 25 drawings of figures and architecture by this Renaissance master, selected by their Italian colleague Adriano Marinazzo and Dr. Spike, who has authored the accompanying catalogue.

On view until April 14, *Michelangelo: Sacred and Profane* opened on February 9 to mark the 30th anniversary of the Muscarelle's founding. Among the guests attending the festivities was the Casa Buonarroti's director, Dr. Pina Ragionieri, as well as senior officials from the Italian Embassy and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the exhibition will conclude its brief tour (April 21-June 30).

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

Madonna and Child

1524, Chalk, red wash, white heightening,
and ink on paper, 21 1/4 x 15 1/2 in.

Casa Buonarroti, Florence



Michelangelo (1475-1564)
Cleopatra (recto)
1532-33, Chalk on paper, 9 1/4 x 7 1/4 in.
Casa Buonarroti, Florence

So what makes Michelangelo's drawings special? In 2006, the British Museum considered this question by displaying an unusually large group of them (153); ironically, Michelangelo intended for only relatives and students to see his preparatory studies, so he would not have been pleased by the crowds who came to admire them in London. Four years later, Aaron De Groft organized a Muscarelle exhibition based on the premise that Michelangelo saw man as the measure of all things, including architecture. Sure enough, Michelangelo's architectural renderings in that show uncannily suggested parts of the human body, especially limbs and faces in profile. (In this year's exhibition, *Various Studies for the Staircase of the Laurentian Library, Column Bases and Figures* — to cite just one example — certainly suggests such a face.)

A drawing often represents an artist's first thoughts about a subject, and Michelangelo usually began with a rapid sketch — in Italian, a *pensiero*, the root of which is "thought." Such sheets offer fascinating insights into his philosophy, personality, and emotions. This season's show specifically examines the dichotomy of sacred and profane within Michelangelo's drawings — an ongoing tension between the divine and the worldly. Distortion and exaggeration characterize his *Madonna and Child*; the infant's bulging muscles and contorted position confirm that he is a sacred being, rather than of our mortal world. By contrast, the nursing Madonna is less defined and looks away from Christ, as if with foreboding for her son's future. *Cleopatra* is a two-sided drawing that juxtaposes the sacred and profane in a different way; indeed, the Egyptian queen's conflicting looks suggested the very title of this exhibition. On one side, she appears serene and inaccessible, lost in thought, oblivious of the swirling intertwining of braids and serpents around her. On the reverse, however, Cleopatra looks wildly anguished, again with her reptilian attributes.

OTHER MASTERS, PAST AND PRESENT

Also on view at the Muscarelle through April 14 is John Spike's selection of 15 paintings by the Baroque painter Mattia Preti (1613-1699), borrowed from museums across North America. Part of an international initiative marking his 400th anniversary, this is the first major U.S. exhibition about Preti, whose depictions of light upon the figure derive directly from the mysterious, contrasting tonalities of his first idol, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610). Preti left his native Calabria to study in Rome, where he fell under the spell of Caravaggio's emotional intensity and juxtapositions of candlelight and darkness. The young artist did not stop there, though, next discovering such Venetian masters as Titian and Veronese, whose theatricality and rich color he revered. Preti moved on to Naples and finally Malta, where he spent the rest of his long career painting commissions for the Knights of Malta and Europe's leading families. John Spike has also prepared the catalogue for this project.

Continuing the story of art from Italy, the Muscarelle recently acquired *A tu lado quiero estar*, a large oil painting by the contemporary realist Ramiro (Angel Ramiro Sánchez), who was born in Venezuela in 1974 and has studied and worked primarily in Florence. Currently head of

Michelangelo (1475-1564)
Cleopatra (verso)
1532-33, Chalk on paper, 9 1/4 x 7 1/4 in.
Casa Buonarroti, Florence





Mattia Preti (1613-1699)
St. Veronica with the Veil
c. 1655-60, Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Ramiro (Angel Ramiro Sánchez, b. 1974)
A tu lado quiero estar (*By your side I want to be*)
 2010, Oil on canvas, 71 x 51 in.
 Muscarelle Museum of Art, Williamsburg, Virginia

the painting program at the Florence Academy of Art (see page 93), Ramiro is thoroughly steeped in the aesthetics of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art, but also infuses his compositions with a more modern sensibility derived from the 19th-century academies. In his portraits, interiors, and landscapes, Ramiro demonstrates that less is more, calling upon viewers to fill in the blanks while ensuring that almost every composition has an autobiographical, introspective aspect.

The Muscarelle's new picture shows the crucifixion of Jesus Christ not from the conventional vantage, but instead from that of Mary (wearing blue), Mary Magdalene, and John as they grieve at the base of the cross. Ramiro says he was inspired by the 13th-century hymn *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, and by Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children). Here, the figure of Mary becomes a universal symbol expressing the sorrows of humanity as she weeps and prays for her son. At the bottom, a stream of water gushes and a plant rises from the darkness, icons of hope alluding to Christ's ultimate victory over death, and derived from both Psalm 118 and Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ*.

In the right foreground, Ramiro inscribed his own Spanish verses that illuminate the scene; in English, they translate as:

*To all the mothers who have seen their children die
 To all the brothers who have lost their own brother
 To all the children who cannot become adults for the
 fault of another adult
 By your side I want to be.*

Following these lines, however, are the words "Rafael Eduardo 1993-2010." Just a month after the painting was completed, the artist's 16-year-old nephew died suddenly, so this extra line became an important way of remembering him.

The arrival of the Ramiro painting in Williamsburg confirms the Muscarelle's exciting decision to collect contemporary figurative art, something that more university museums should consider doing for a wide range of reasons. It will be fascinating to see how this initiative develops in the years ahead; in the meantime, readers should seriously consider visiting Williamsburg to experience the genius of Michelangelo and Preti. ■

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Ramiro painting *A tu lado quiero estar* in 2010