Michelangelo's Dream

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The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, London

18 February to 16 May 2010

Many of the drawings in this spacious and well laid out show were made by Michelangelo for a Roman nobleman whom he greatly admired. They were not preparatory sketches, but intended as works of art in themselves. I found them frankly grotesque — absurdly proportioned males, women who looked like men with breasts and a penectomy, and horses that looked like tapirs falling into a river. Even the resurrected Christ looks more like a champion bodybuilder claiming his prize than a man who has recently undergone flagellation and crucifixion. Only two drawings seem to me to be genuinely great, 'The Dream of Human Life' from which the exhibition takes its title, and one of a man being attacked by an eagle which is entitled, wrongly in my view, 'The Punishment of Tityus' (of which more later). The finest things in the show are Michelangelo's letters and poems, addressed to the Roman nobleman for whom the drawings were done, Tommaso de' Cavalieri: the beauty of the script and the text is breathtaking.

Accompanying the drawings and letters is a 1568 edition of Vasari's 'Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects', and it is here that we learn that the drawing of the man chained to a rock having his liver eaten by an eagle is called 'Tityus', whose fate, according to Homer, was to have his liver eaten out by two vultures. Renaissance artists did not make mistakes like that in classical iconography. I do not know why Vasari's title has gone unchallenged here — the obvious subject is in fact Prometheus, who would make a far more convincing humanist subject than a lustful giant, since Prometheus' punishment was for bringing humanity the gift of fire, an allegory for the sacrifices involved in imparting knowledge to humanity.

What the exhibition does is to provoke thoughts about changes in taste. Reflections on the well-upholstered nature

of the women regarded as beautiful by artists like Rubens — even Renoir — are something of a commonplace; reflections on homosexual artists' perception of male beauty are less so. When one looks at the real males depicted by Michelangelo's contemporaries, they tend to be quite slender. His own male figures are grotesquely muscled, for instance the elderly man on the Medici tombs in Florence who has the grizzled face of a well-worn 60-year old, and the body of an over-developed shot-putter. Such physiques do not occur naturally, and it is hard to imagine Italians of the 16th century on the weights machine. In short, we are confronted with a Renaissance gay fantasy, and I am not sure what this says about Michelangelo's relationship with de' Cavalieri, except that while it may have been chaste, it is uncertain that Michelangelo would have kept it that way if he had the choice, for all the high-minded talk about spiritual beauty.

All of that said, the 'Dream' is wonderful, and worth a visit for itself, especially as the

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). The Dream, c. 1533
Black chalk, 39.4 x 27.7 cm. The Courtauld Gallery, London.

price of admission includes all the rest of the Courtauld's permanent collection.

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp10X484084

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). The Punishment of Tityus, 1532. Black chalk, 19 x 33 cm. Royal Collection © 2010 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.