

# **Catherine Whistler - Michelangelo Buonarroti's (attributed), The Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist**

CATHERINE WHISTLER: My name is Catherine Whistler. I'm Curator of Italian Art here at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. And I want to talk to you about a rather mysterious and quite experimental work by Michelangelo Buonarroti. But first, here we have the man himself in this bronze portrait bust made by a close friend, Daniele da Volterra. It's a very naturalistic representation of Michelangelo towards the age of 80. I think the bust conveys something of the intensity and the strength of the artist's character.

This is the work of art we're looking at today, quite a substantial drawing. Or is it a painting? This is made with the brush dipped in a thinnish wash-like pigment, brownish in colour. And it's drawn with the brush on a ground with a greeny-grey preparation.

We don't really know anything about it as an object. We believe it's by Michelangelo. We don't know why he made it, for what purpose, or what its original location might have been. The subject itself is also enigmatic.

It appears to show the Virgin Mary with St. Joseph, the little Christ child, and Saint John the Baptist as a family group. There's a shape here in the background which is hard to make out. It could be the head of an animal, like a donkey. So it looks as though it might be the return of the holy family after the flight into Egypt, which is quite a traditional subject in art.

They're advancing towards us frontally, spread out across the picture plane. There's no detail of landscape, no hint of any setting. It's all about the figures and their relationship.

The figures are represented nude. And this is the way that Michelangelo, and indeed most Renaissance artists, worked. That is, understanding the movement, the form, the shape, the energy of the body before adding drapery. He has given some indications of slightly strange drapery to the Virgin Mary, again, in a way that's very typical of Michelangelo himself.

What's lovely about it is this sense of familial affection. The Virgin Mary is holding the young St. John the Baptist carefully, keeping him with her. And the little Christ child has got a harness. She's holding the harness to help him walk. And St. Joseph, who's got his arm behind the Virgin Mary, is leaning forward, again, to hold and protect the little child. So there's a very touching element here as well as the fact that the figures are monumental in terms of their scale and the way that they fill the whole surface.

The purpose of this brush drawing, this substantial brush drawing on a wooden panel, is unknown. And it raises questions. Is it a painting, an unfinished painting? Or is it a design, a drawing made for its own sake? It also raises questions about authorship. We believe it's by Michelangelo. We believe this because the figure types, the approach to composition,

relationships that we can find with other works by Michelangelo all attest to its authorship, as does its rather eccentric and experimental quality.

If this is the under-drawing for a painting, then it's really not at all what one would expect to find. The surface, for example, is far too rough to be an unfinished painting. It might, however, be an idea that Michelangelo chose to execute on this large scale - the realisation of a thought on this subject, which another artist might have then taken forward. But we only have the work itself. We don't have any other traces of it.

Michelangelo is a powerfully innovative and creative artist. He stands out very often as a kind of solitary figure who went his own way and was admired very much for sometimes his bizarre creations. By the time that this was made and on the basis of style - we think it's towards 1520 - Michelangelo was working especially for the Medici Pope, Leo X.

He had many projects, challenging projects, in hand. And Michelangelo's own personality was one of abrasiveness. He was very proud, had a great sense of his own honour, was very prickly, could also be very affectionate with his own friends. But Pope Leo X found him impossible to deal with and actually said he was 'terribile', *terribile* meaning grand but also difficult.

For Michelangelo, drawing was fundamental to the visual arts - to painting, to sculpture, and to architecture. And his own drawings were admired and valued very strongly in his lifetime. So here, we see him drawing with the brush on this prepared panel, facing up to and testing a traditional subject, a very popular subject in art, but bringing his own meditative and devotional thoughts to it.

This work would have been valued by Michelangelo's contemporaries even though we don't know where it might have been seen - in his studio, in his house, or in the house of a friend or patron. It came to the Ashmolean Museum with a great collection of Michelangelo drawings in the middle of the 19th century. These works had been owned by the British artist Sir Thomas Lawrence, who was a passionate collector who bankrupted himself in doing so.

Before that, this had been owned by another collector, William Ottley, who said (and he was quite careful in what he wrote about his collection) that it had come from the King of Naples. This implies that Michelangelo's unfinished work was in the Farnese Collection, which is a prestigious, princely collection in Rome. So it brings us, if we believe Ottley, it brings us back through time closer to Michelangelo's own day.

Hanging here in the Ashmolean Museum, this work has a really powerful presence. What are the figures trying to tell us? They are compelling us to look. And the unfinished nature of the work also asks us to bring our creativity to bear on it, our thoughts about the subject.

Michelangelo is really thinking about the nature of the relationship of the holy family and, particularly, the nature of the divine. The Christ child is the saviour. The miracle of the incarnation means that the divine takes on human form.

But here, what is being stressed above all, is the child as a vulnerable little toddler who might fall over at any minute if he's not protected by his mother holding him on this harness and St. Joseph, his adopted father, holding him, again, protectively supporting him.

And this brings us into thoughts about kind of devotion in when Michelangelo was a child himself. In medieval times, ideas of the first steps of Christ as part of a spiritual journey were quite strong. Michelangelo grew up in Florence at a time when ideas about the education of boys had changed. Education was to be more about encouragement, affection, bringing out the potential of young boys who, of course, were going to be the heads of families, extended households, responsible citizens, civic leaders.

The result of this was new ways of thinking about the Christ child and St. John the Baptist. Boys were encouraged to take St. John the Baptist as a role model. And images, such as here in this gallery, a very beautiful marble bust of the smiling young St. John the Baptist, these were very popular in Florentine homes. Little boys looked at the figure of St. John the Baptist and were encouraged to model themselves on his qualities and virtues and to think about the relationship of the Christ child and John the Baptist as one they should bring into their own relationships.

So in a way, this beautiful unfinished work tells us more about how this kind of subject in art could be a trigger for familial conversations and also for devotion to the holy family. Michelangelo was able, in works like this, to deal with broad and moving themes. We're at a time in history when Protestant reformers are challenging the authority of the Catholic Church.

And what happens later in the century is that religious art becomes more orthodox. Rules are laid down as to how subjects should be portrayed. And the New Testament is the touchstone for representations.

The Christ child being led with a little harness, stumbling forward is certainly not a subject that you would find in public art later on in the 16th century with the Counter-Reformation. Instead, we're here at a moment when innovation and experimentation is still possible. And Michelangelo, above all, is an artist who takes these spiritual themes and really pushes them to their limits.

Even though we don't know why Michelangelo made this work or where it was intended to be viewed, nonetheless, it has a very arresting quality with these powerful figures, mysterious, enigmatic still. They seem to speak to us over the centuries. And the very fact that this unfinished work is here hanging in the Ashmolean Museum, again, tells of the huge admiration and respect in which Michelangelo's works were held, even his unfinished works, so much so that they were preserved by collectors and art lovers over the centuries and have come down to us today.