**The Mystery of Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina***

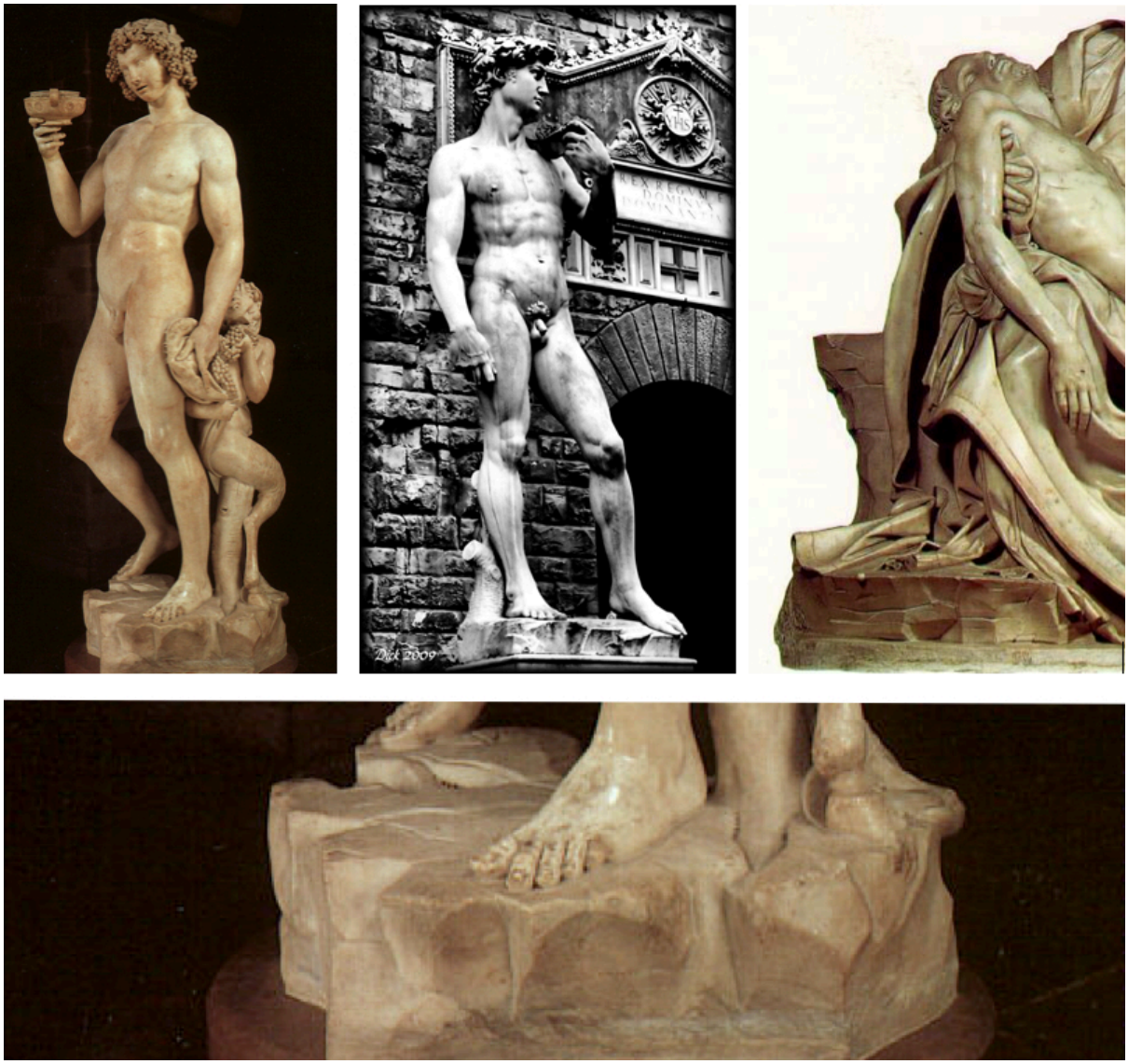
by Simon Abrahams

After Michelangelo, *The Battle of Cascina* (1504)

In January this year I added an entry on Michelangelo's *The Battle of Cascina*, a cartoon for a never-completed mural in the civic heart of Florence which is one of the most celebrated and influential works in the history of art. A composition on paper with nearly twenty life-size figures, it was worn to shreds by admiring artists sketching it. Today it is known through a copy (above). I argued at the time that the faceted rock of the river bank is a metaphor for Michelangelo's mind. Joost Keizer's recent analysis in the September *Art Bulletin* made me think again because he identifies additional problems with conventional understanding of the scene, problems that I had not noticed.[1]

The young sculptor was asked by the government of Florence to depict the 1364 battle against the Pisan army, for which they were no doubt imagining a full-scale battle. Instead he portrayed a group of Florentine soldiers who, as a chronicle reports, had

been skinny-dipping in the river when the Pisan army launched a surprise attack. Keizer argues that when Michelangelo chose to depict this moment before the battle rather than the battle itself he "did away with traditional content and took instead the making of art as its subject."[2] His findings are entirely in agreement with our own views and they are most welcome but he is right for the wrong reasons. Keizer points out, for instance, that a man's arm stretching down into the river to help a comrade is so poorly placed that the probable target of his gesture, two hands disappearing under the water, are several yards downstream.[3] Such lack of logic, he argues, completely subverts the narrative consistency that art theory had made the hallmark of history painting.[4] Instead, he continues, Michelangelo provides a variety of original poses unrelated to each other or any subject. Renaissance art practice, he observes, was founded on the male nude and these figures so enthralled other artists that they often re-used them in their work. The fact that they did so out of context and without any evident meaning confirms for Keiser that they meant little to Michelangelo as well: just "a conglomerate of isolated figure studies that has more to say about the history of representation than the city's glorious military past."[5] In Keiser's view Michelangelo presents himself as a teacher of figurative art and not as one of the world's great poets. So even though the image does defy narrative consistency, his own conclusion is equaly illogical. There is another way within a scenario that is logically more consistent.



From top left: *Bacchus*, *David* and a detail of the *Vatican Pieta*; Below: Detail of *Bacchus*

As I pointed out in January many of Michelangelo's works are situated similarly, on a crevassed rockface jagged horizontally along the lower edge of the image or as a base, if sculpture. Early works like *Bacchus*, *David* and the Vatican *Pieta* (see above, with a detail from *Bacchus*) sit or stand on similar ground; it appears in the background of the *Doni Tondo* and the foreground of the *Execution of St. Peter*, in a less acute form in *The Creation of Adam* and at the base of the *Last Judgment*. Strangely, I do not recall anyone (with the exception of Paul Barolsky, perhaps) bringing these remarkable features to a viewer's notice even though they must have had deep meaning for the artist. I have long argued that all Michelangelo's works are located *inside* his mind, not outside, which

is why anatomical forms can be found all over the Sistine ceiling. As a practitioner of interiorized Christianity Michelangelo would also have believed in the mystical motto, "As above, so below." It encompasses an understanding that the human body is a miniature microcosm of the macrocosm. Indeed, contrary to the views of most experts, that is why Michelangelo was so keen on anatomical dissection; he was not looking to perfect his figure drawing but for knowledge of the heavens, of another reality, a key fact that needs to be recognized. Given that interest, it is logical to assume that the rocky ground common to so many of his works is a cracked portion of his own skull from which in painted images grass (illogically on the narrative level) grows, to indicate both the fertility of his mind and his hair.

In the *Battle of Cascina* the crack in his skull is long with a river running through it. We must thus be looking from one side of his mind to the other, across the long, central crack in the skull known as the *fontanelle*. Open for the first few weeks of an infant's life, it was there that the soul was believed to enter at birth and leave at death. (In a later drawing, *The Dream of Human Life*, Michelangelo showed an angel entering through the *fontanelle* in the reverse direction. See entry.) The fact that the crack here is still open must mean, on the poetic level, that Michelangelo's soul at the moment of creative inspiration (the moment he conceived this image) has been "reborn", as the infant Christ. Out of this divine infant's mind (Michelangelo's) climb the original and inventive poses of young Michelangelo's soldiers, all self-representations of his poetic strength embarking on a heroic quest to become the greatest artist of all time. Artists often use military metaphors to portray their poetic power.[6] As others have noted too, of other figures by Michelangelo, the soldiers here are both artist and model, subject and object combined. In confirmation, a figure in the center wraps a turban round his head. He does so, on the poetic level, not to face Pisan soldiers in battle but to keep marble dust

out of his hair. Turbans, as we explained last week, were commonly worn in Renaissance studios.[7]

Now we can return to that pair of hands "in the water." They are not calling for help because they are the hands of the artist which, emerging from his Christ-like mind, are the inverted hands of God and the symbol of Michelangelo's craft.[8] I should mention that in January I described the rock as brain matter, fudging the difference between a hard crack in the skull and the wet flesh of the cerebral cortex. Today I stand by that description. I still think it represents both on the poetic level, the zig-zag contour of a crack and the multi-faceted form of the cerebral cortex. The rock, whichever way you look at it, is Michelangelo's mind.

Filippo Lippi, *Adoration in the Forest*

If this sounds far removed from what you might expect in a Renaissance artwork, take a look at another entry online, Filippo Lippi's *Adoration in the Forest* painted fifty years earlier. It, too, is a mind-opening story.

**Endnotes**

[1] Joost Keizer, "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Subject of Art", *Art Bulletin* 93, Sept. 2011, pp. 304-324
[2] ibid., p. 305
[3] ibid., p. 307
[4] ibid., p. 308
[5] ibid., p. 314
[6] See the theme **Swords and Weapon as Brushes**.
[7] See Filippo Lippi's *Dead Christ* and the Artist's Turban
[8] Picasso used a similar pair of disembodied hands at the base of his 1904 painting, *The Actor.* See entry.