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# A Comparison of the Works of Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo

## One Body, Multiple Meanings

Without a doubt, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo are two of the most influential artists in the history of modern civilizations. With their array of detailed and accurate works, both da Vinci and Michelangelo are both regarded as two of the best artists ever. But despite these apparent similarities and comparisons, the specific method each studied the human body resulted in highly different approaches to portraying the human body. In rendering these human bodies in different forms, both artists projected certain messages through these depictions. But while da Vinci was deeply influenced by painting and drawing, Michelangelo was more of a sculptor at his roots, and rarely preferred painting. However, both were fascinated with the human body, and studied it intensely through dissections to better understand them. Yet despite their similar fascination with the human body, how each studied it resulted in a different manifestation within their respective artwork.

Leonardo da Vinci was incredibly invested in drawing and painting perfect representations of the human body. From studying previous anatomists such as Galen and Hippocrates to dissecting his own human bodies, da Vinci was focused on perfection. However, what makes da Vinci unique is that he not only used anatomy to facilitate his own art, but also as a science. As Domenico Laurenza would say, “he was both an artist and a scientist, in the fullest sense” (Laurenza 10) What this meant is that da Vinci not only used dissections to look at muscle structure and things useful to his artwork, but also to analyze the human body as a whole. In fact, several anatomical discoveries are credited to da Vinci for his work in what we still use in contemporary anatomy. As Laurenza says, “With Leonardo, artists' interest in anatomy reached its zenith, yet at the same time artistic anatomy became something completely different from what it had been earlier in the Renaissance—that is, substantially the study of the muscles and skeleton as part of the process of representing the nude in art” (Laurenza 11). For da Vinci, these dissections were not only for understanding the microscopic mechanisms of the body, but the macroscopic mechanisms as well. Not only did he study the heart, blood veins, muscles; he also studied how these were all interconnected. That is, part of da Vinci's dissection involved understanding how separate organisms made up the whole. As da Vinci's own notes detail in describing the tendons in a neck, “First you shall make the spine of the neck with its tendons like a mast of a ship with its rigging, without the head; then make the head with its tendons which give its motion upon its pole.” It's clear that to da Vinci, not only were the small minute details important, but also their role in the larger whole. As Otto Benesch states, “The artist and the

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scientist are interdependent. Leonardo possessed not only the masculine sovereign and creative power, but also the feminine gift of highest empathy. He lived in the heart of things. His drawings prove that he felt like the object which he portrayed, that he identified himself with it. He looked at the world from the center, from the matrix, and it became diaphanous to him in an almost magic clearness” (Benesch 327).

Looking at da Vinci’s work, this concept is very clear. Rather than exaggerate proportions for dramatic effect, da Vinci wanted exactness and preciseness. In studying the human body, da Vinci looked for more than to simply improve his art. Rather, for him, studying anatomy helped him gain a larger understanding of the world as a whole. Art was simply a tool to help Leonardo achieve that goal. Laurenza furthers, stating that “Leonardo produced the most complex and sophisticated anatomical representation of all time. That this perfection contained its own limits, however, is exemplified by a set of drawings of strictly scientific scope, with no artificial poses or indeed even landscape” (Laurenza 13). For example, what makes the Vitruvian Man so unique are the specific proportions of the body. Encased within both a circle and a square, da Vinci demonstrates the proportionality of each body part, and how each section relates to the others. Compared to other versions in his time, which usually distorted the body to make it fit within the circle and square, da Vinci understood the specific proportions necessary. As demonstrated in his notes, “If you open the legs so as to reduce the stature by one-fourteenth and open and raise your arms so that your middle fingers touch the line through the top of the head, know that the centre of the extremities of the outspread limbs will be the umbilicus, and the space between the legs will make an equilateral triangle”. As such it’s clear that through his examination of the human body, Leonardo da Vinci sought more than to just supplement his art. Instead, da Vinci saw the human body as a representation of the world, and looked at it in a macroscopic view.

While da Vinci was primarily a painter and drawer, Michelangelo vastly preferred sculpting to all others. As opposed to da Vinci using art as a method to find greater meaning in the world, Michelangelo’s goal was to understand the meaning of art itself. As such, his anatomical study revolved around using it to supplement his art. Uninterested with what lay inside the human body and how it functioned, Michelangelo focused on external anatomy, that is, the muscles and contours of the human body. He looked at the form of the body, how the underlying muscles and skeleton contributed to movement and appearance. It is because of this Michelangelo produced primarily nudes. As Laurenza states, “Anatomy for Michelangelo consisted above all of the careful study of these metamorphoses of form... and when he made studies and drawings of dissected bodies what was foremost in his mind was always the nude: the body clothed in skin, alive and in motion” (Laurenza 14). As such it’s clear that Michelangelo’s approach to dissections and anatomy was centered around his art, and was entirely based around the body itself, rather than a greater meaning or representation.

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When looking at Michelangelo's work, the difference from da Vinci's approach becomes clear. While da Vinci was very much focused on proportion, Michelangelo regularly exaggerated perspective and size to give his art a larger meaning. Instead of everything being perfectly anatomically representative, his works were adjusted depending on what he wanted to get across. For example, looking at Michelangelo's Pieta, not everything is perfectly proportioned. In relation to Jesus Christ, The Virgin Mary is abnormally large, especially since the Pieta depicts Jesus as a grown man after he has been crucified. Furthermore, scholars have noted that the positioning of Jesus' body is slightly inconsistent with those of an actual cadaver. Indeed, as Joseph Lombardo details, "the right hand of Jesus and the lower extremities prove that Jesus is alive. The right hand clasps a fold of the Madonna's draperies between the parted second and third fingers, a feat impossible for a body in rigor mortis" (Hilloowala 88). As Michelangelo had studied anatomical structure very closely, it's very unlikely Michelangelo simply "messed up". Rather, Hilloowala argues that the Pieta is actually a Madonna and Child in the form of a Pieta. In doing so, it becomes representative of Michelangelo's feelings during the time he produced the Pieta. As Hilloowala discusses, "The most profound and driving emotion in Michelangelo's life was the early terror of maternal disappearances. This prompted a lifelong quest for the reconciliation of mother and son" (Hilloowala 91). As such, it's clear in looking at the Pieta that Michelangelo used anatomy as a function of art, manipulating it at will to introduce his own latent feelings.

Both Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were prominent artists, each with their own successes. And while both developed their art styles with a great interest in anatomy and the human body, how each studied it resulted in different manifestations of the same thing. For Leonardo, the end goal was not art. Rather, art and anatomy were tools used hand in hand to gain a greater meaning to the microcosm. As such, he studied the intricacies of how each organ and vein interacted with each other to gain a greater understanding of the whole, which manifested itself in his artwork as rigid, scientific proportions with no room for error. However, in contrast, Michelangelo saw art as the end, with anatomy simply a tool to get there. He was focused on the form of the body, how the body changed with movement, and used that to give greater meaning to his artwork. As such, Michelangelo freely changed and manipulated the human body to convey his attitudes and ideas. And while between da Vinci and Michelangelo there is no one "right" way to do things, their different interpretations of the same things show us the complexity of the world. Given the same materials, each individual will create a different thing based on his own goals and perspectives.

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