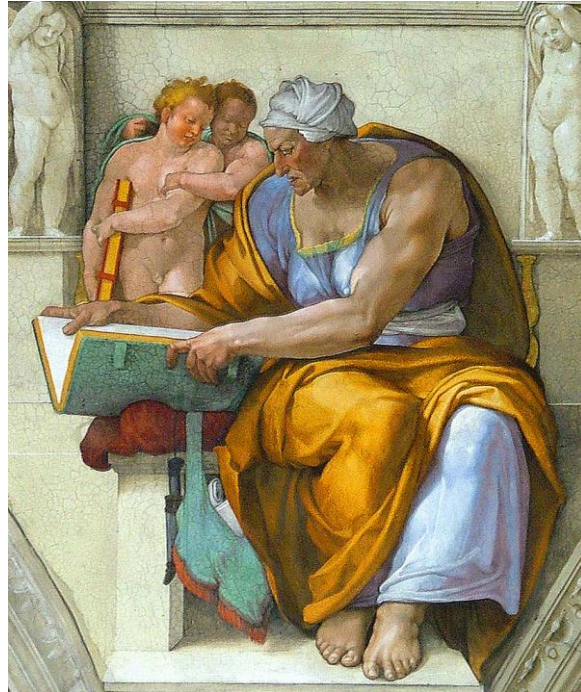


Michelangelo and Sebastiano  
15 March - 25 June 2017  
North Galleries  
The National Gallery, London



Sebastiano del Piombo, *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1517-19. *The National Gallery London*. The figure of Lazarus is based on a drawing by Michelangelo.



Michelangelo, *The Cumaean Sybil*, Sistine Chapel, Rome, 1508-1512. Notice the similarity in the twist and snap of the figures, what Michelangelo called "La Figura Serpentinata".

As the possessor of what, in my family, is euphemistically known as an artistic temperament I know a fellow sufferer when I see one. From 1985 to the publication in 1992 of my first book on Michelangelo, I visited the Sistine Chapel ceiling at least three times a year, and from a vantage point of over 60 feet in the air I became intimate with the cycle of magnificent frescoes. I lived and breathed Michelangelo and his complicated life and work, his arguments and grudges, his complaints and his moaning. Proximity to greatness was not inspiring but profoundly overwhelming and ultimately dispiriting. It did my own work as an artist no good at all. How could it? But touching the frescoes with kid gloves, examining his work under a microscope, reading his letters and sonnets (some of which I translated for my book), and drawing the frescoes from close up, it felt to me as though I grew to know the man himself. I dreamed about him constantly and my own work as an artist developed a colour range that owed a great deal to his "colori cangianti" - his shimmering silky colours that dominate the Sistine. I drew Michelangelo's figures within touch of the ceiling vault (they were immensely distorted when viewed so closely, designed as they were to be seen from the ground) and later on, when the restoration began on the altar wall, I climbed on ladders all over the Last Judgement. Surreal or what? Humbling for sure.

The restoration scaffolding, which moved slowly across the ceiling over 12 years, used the anchor points of Michelangelo's own original scaffolding, and over the years I grew used to his ghostly presence. I had the immense privilege of lying on the floor of the Sistine chapel for an hour, on my own in the magnificent space - a gift from the restoration team who became my good friends. They taught me how to recognise his "divine" touch as opposed to the touch of his numerous assistants, summarily and regularly fired from 1508 to 1512. I grew accustomed to his shifts in style across the ceiling, from the cramped hieratic stillness of the first half, before God comes into the cycle, to the larger magisterial figures of the second half, (painted after 1510), when he moved the scaffolding and could see his own work for the first time.

The restorers and academics, under the leadership of Fabrizio Mancinelli and Maestro Colalucci, talked intimately of Michelangelo like a much loved but cranky old friend, a victim of his own grand artistic temperament, a friendless case of alienation and misanthropy. They knew his moods on a particular day (fresco by its very nature is done in sections called "giornate" or days) and they taught me to see when he was frustrated by his technique, or when he was flummoxed by an awkward piece of painting, handing it over to a mediocre helper. For Michelangelo was a reluctant painter and a volatile, arrogant, angry, rivalrous maverick. He possessed that elusive quality ascribed to him by his contemporaries - "terribilità". You could translate this as an artistic temperament writ as large as the Sistine Chapel itself.

And so, the very premise of this brilliant and revelatory new show at London's National Gallery is a huge surprise. Sebastiano does not come out of the story as well as he might (who could, against the might of Il Divino?). But nevertheless it's the first exhibition of its kind, and the first to showcase Sebastiano in the UK. And I believe it will be surprising to art historians and the wider public too. Michelangelo's distrust and dislike of other artists, his assistants, his peers - most notably his handsome and short-lived rival Raphael, is very well known. That the Venetian oil painter Sebastiano del Piombo was a collaborator and creative partner is also documented. But this show is much more than the sum of its parts. The extent of this creative friendship is astonishing and unprecedented. It has yielded some very great paintings. By both, individually, and sometimes even by the two of them in the same painting. It's enough to make one think that Michelangelo was a generous man and a generous artist.

Needless to say, the relationship did not end well.