

The simplicity of a sketch, the comparative rapidity with which it is produced, the concentration of meaning demanded by its rigid economy of means, render it more symbolical, more like the hieroglyph of its maker's mind, than any finished work can be. . . . If this be true of all artists, it is in a peculiar sense true of Michelangelo.

—J. A. Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, 1893<sup>1</sup>

The bald, clean-shaven man, with formidable frown, nut-cracker nose and chin . . . seem[s] to have typified for Leonardo vigour and resolution, and so he becomes the counterpart of that other profile which came with equal facility from Leonardo's pen—the epicene youth. These are, in fact, the two hieroglyphs of Leonardo's unconscious mind, the two images his hand created when his attention was wandering.

—Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci: An Account of His Development as an Artist*, 1939<sup>2</sup>

## HIEROGLYPHS OF THE MIND

Two celebrated biographers, writing at half a century's distance from each other about two great artists, have recourse to the same metaphor in their attempt to convey the unique status of drawing as it distinguishes itself from the more substantial visual media on which the popular fame of this pair of geniuses mostly resided. Why the hieroglyph? The term had become proverbial ever since the Rosetta Stone, discovered during the Napoleonic campaigns in Egypt, had enabled early nineteenth-century scholars to decipher a system of notation that had fascinated and puzzled Europeans all the way back, indeed, to the lifetimes of these two Renaissance artists.<sup>3</sup>

But Jean-François Champollion is not the only researcher lurking beneath the surface of this art-historical metaphor. Between Symonds's generation and Clark's, a strand of European culture had been revolutionized by a grand postulate according to which each individual was psychically guided by a set of forces as fascinating, and as difficult to decode, as those on any Egyptian tablet. Not only had Sigmund Freud asserted the discovery of the unconscious, and offered up the tools for its decipherment, he had also laid particular stress on the psychic life of great art-

1

ists—in particular, the two referred to in the above quotations. In fact, he had based his analysis of Leonardo in particular on a dream whose significance depends on the Egyptian hieroglyph for “mother.”<sup>4</sup> No surprise, then, that Symonds’s “hieroglyph of its maker’s mind” becomes Clark’s “hieroglyphs of Leonardo’s *unconscious* mind.” The metaphor they share oscillates between notions of symbolism in the case of the earlier writer, as though the artist had revealed secret meanings in his preliminary work, and notions of psychic process in the case of the later writer, as though the artist’s hand possessed a consciousness of its own, capable of bypassing the mind. However we might understand these distinctions, for both Symonds and Clark the message about drawings is clear: grand artistic achievements like the *Mona Lisa* or the *Moses* represent the public face of artistic production, whereas sketches (and the sketchier the better) represent the artist’s interior life, even in ways of which the artist himself may not be aware.

As it happens, the history of art has a two-thousand-year jump on Freud in this mode of thinking. “It is an exceedingly rare thing, and worthy of memory,” says Pliny in the *Natural History*,

that the last works of artists and the pictures they leave uncompleted, such as the Iris of Aristides, the Tyndaridae of Nicomachus, the Medea of Timomachus, and the Venus of Apelles, are held in greater admiration than their completed pieces, because in these works it is possible to observe the outlines that remain [*liniamenta reliqua*] and the very thoughts [*cogitationes*] of the artists.<sup>5</sup>

It should come as no surprise that this passage fascinated two writers on the cusp between Classicism and Romanticism, with Hume finding in it the principle of pain that is necessary for aesthetic pleasure and Diderot the notion that *le génie s’éveille au milieu des ruines*.<sup>6</sup> But this account of artistry was in place long before the Enlightenment, operating on the same coordinates as those of Symonds or Clark. On the one hand, there are the *liniamenta reliqua*, the preliminary marks of half-finished work; on the other, the postulate of the *cogitationes*, which may refer to the program that was to be realized in the finished picture or else to the mental image that preceded and generated the final work. However these terms are to be understood, it is clear that there is a fragmentary, hidden, or invisible medium that can tell deeper truths than the finished product, but only if properly decoded. Drawings-as-hieroglyphs, then, promise some sort of key to the full internal process of the artist’s creative labor.

But there is another side to the metaphor, suggesting something of which even Symonds and Clark may not be entirely conscious. A hieroglyph is, to be sure, a picture; but a hieroglyph is also *writing*. It is, in other words, surely no coincidence that this term should be used in relation to two visual artists who were also well known for producing considerable quantities of text. Leonardo was, of course, a compulsive writer, covering some fifteen thousand sheets of notebook paper with his famous mirror script, which in reality was probably nothing more exotic than an adaptation to left-handedness but which has helped generate several centuries of mystical aura around him (Figure 1-1).<sup>7</sup> The topics of his interest range



1-1.

Leonardo da Vinci, studies for water apparatuses. Codex Arundel, fol. 24v. British Library



1-2.

Title page of the 1623 edition of Michelangelo Buonarroti's poetry from the Guido Mazzoni Pamphlet Collection located in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University

broadly: literature, mythology, aesthetics, anatomy, technology, and, above all, the workings of nature. Added together—though, interestingly, these manuscript pages were *not* added together in any systematic way until the nineteenth century—they provide the foundation for Leonardo's identity as "Renaissance Man," and indeed for the very concept of the early modern genius as a *uomo universale* rather than a specialist.

This is not a book about Leonardo, of course, and if I pass quickly to that other multiply talented genius, it is partly because Michelangelo's status as a producer of text has received less attention than Leonardo's. Michelangelo, too, was an assiduous writer: three hundred poems; five hundred letters; thousands of *ricordi*, or memos; many pages of conversation transcribed (or invented) by others; and the promise of various discussions concerning art theory and practice, one of which seems to have been conceived as a response to Dürer's *Four Books on Human Proportion*.<sup>8</sup> Not that we should be dazzled by mere statistics. Considering the prose writing of artists from Ghiberti to Cellini, and the poetry of others from Raphael to Bronzino, it may almost have been the norm for painters and sculptors to exercise their skills at language.<sup>9</sup> And, if the modern reception of Michelangelo has marginalized his writing, the situation within his lifetime was no different. His contemporary biographers collect every scrap of information about his work in the visual arts, but mention his writing only briefly; it took sixty years after his death for his collected poems to be published, and then in a rather bastardized form (Figure 1-2). Even when—on the occasion of his grand state funeral, for instance (Figure 1-3)—the celebratory emphasis is upon his multiplicity of talents, the range is limited to sculpture, painting, and architecture, with poetry mostly left out of the mix.<sup>10</sup>

There is, however, another way of understanding Michelangelo's relation to writing, which may distinguish him from most of the other artists who dabbled in text. The artist's contemporary biographers, Vasari and Condivi, may not narrate the production of the Master's sonnets and madrigals in the way they follow the stages of the Julius Tomb, but they both assert triumphantly that he was passionately devoted to Dante and Petrarch—indeed, that he could recite their works from memory.<sup>11</sup> Even if that proposition is somewhat mythic and hagiographical (though, as it turns out, possibly true), it points to an aspect of his career that may be as significant as the actual production of texts. Whatever quantity of words he put down on paper or published in books, Michelangelo came to be understood in his lifetime as a literary man. A flood of tex-

tual activity from the 1540s attests to this status. The artist's Florentine anti-Medicean friends Luigi del Riccio and Donato Giannotti plan (though they do not live to execute) a collected edition of his poetry. Giannotti composes dialogues, heavily indebted to Plato, narrating a stroll through Rome in conversation with Michelangelo, in which the artist is given a starring role in thorny discussions concerning Dante's *Commedia*. In a quite different vein, but with similar literary associations, a story is told about an event in Florence when both Leonardo and Michelangelo were invited to expound Dante—the (unsurprising) pay-off being that Leonardo was charming while Michelangelo was rude. Another close associate, the humanist Benedetto Varchi, commences his inaugural lectures for the Florentine Academy with a close analysis of a Michelangelo sonnet (“Non ha l’ottimo artista . . .”), in which metaphors of sculpting are used to elucidate amorous desire.<sup>12</sup>

It is reasonable to approach some of this material with a measure of skepticism. In the absence of tape recorders, the literary form of the dialogue, from Plato to Castiglione and beyond, can never be taken as a literal chronicle of fact: indeed, it is possible that no such meetings as these ever took place. Furthermore, in all of this third-party celebration of Michelangelo as literary man, there may be an overriding propaganda motive, relating either to the republican sentiments of Florentine exiles or, quite contrariwise, to attempts at glorifying the later Medici as patrons of a grand, multidisciplinary academy. Yet we must not overlook the central role that Michelangelo was being assigned in these kinds of projects. Giannotti's *Dialogue* begins with Luigi del Riccio and Antonio Petreo in a heated discussion concerning the amount of time Dante spent on his epic three-part journey—a theme that had already become a topos of literary criticism, given the poem's contradictory time schemes, as between the sacred calendar (from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday) and the actual onrush of episodes in its hundred cantos. But as soon as they run into Michelangelo and Giannotti on their own walk from the Campidoglio, the interpersonal dynamic undergoes a change, moving from free dispu-



1-3.

Giorgio Vasari, tomb of Michelangelo.  
Santa Croce, Florence

tation almost to lecture mode, in which Michelangelo is understood as the real Dante expert who will furnish the right answers and, insofar as possible, harmonize differences of opinion. Michelangelo's magic touch is even more vividly chronicled in the second dialogue (much briefer but with issues of greater political moment), concerning Dante's punishment of Brutus and Cassius, whom he had placed at the lowest pit of hell for participating in the assassination of Julius Caesar. This group of conversants, after all, is sentenced to living in exile among Rome's imperial residues precisely because of their opposition to the absolutist designs of the Medici back in Florence. That Dante should have declared tyrannicide to be the gravest sin of all—equal to Judas's betrayal of Christ—can hardly sit well with them. Only one man can be assigned the impossible task of squaring this political error with a passionate love for both the beauty and the truth of the *Commedia*; and Michelangelo, in a quite complicated pirouette of argumentation, proves equal to the challenge.

How Michelangelo manages this piece of reasoning, by turning Brutus into an allegory and by suggesting that Julius Caesar would have been a lesser tyrant than the successors who were installed as a result of the assassination, is less important than the fact that both concord and truth, on a subject both political and literary, are being offered up by an individual whose worldwide fame is in the quite separate field of the visual arts. In a similar set of moves, Varchi, by launching his literary and humanistic exercise with the "Non ha l'ottimo artista" sonnet, casts Michelangelo as the figure whose life and career can epitomize the interrelations among poetry, love, and sculpture. All the better that he can be persistently identified with Dante, owing to their parallel forms of greatness and to the *Commedia*-like scope of the *Last Judgment*: "And, so far as I'm concerned, I do not doubt for a moment that Michelangelo, just as he imitated Dante in his poetry, also imitated him in his artistic works, not only giving them that grandeur and majesty which one sees in the conceptions of Dante, but also exercising his genius so as to do, either in marble or pigment, that which Dante had done in his words and sentences."<sup>13</sup> Varchi's lectures will go on to explore the comparisons, or *paragoni*, between sculpture and painting, and then between art and poetry, always with Michelangelo as a reference point. The artist thus provides the discursive pivot and center for a whole map of culture, allowing him to be canonized as a kind of Überhumanist capable of bridging the gap between the life of the image and the life of the word, even had he never composed any text at all.



Which takes us back to hieroglyphs, the place where picture and writing intersect. Both Leonardo and Michelangelo were visual artists who *did* compose text, famously so; and their operations in these two realms gave ample evidence, already to their contemporaries, that they should be placed within a tradition where image and word, visuality and language, exist in a strenuously interlocking relationship. Such a tradition runs very deep. Among the most frequently quoted pieces of ancient aesthetic theory, both within antiquity and later, are the dictum of Simonides of Ceos to the effect that “a poem is a speaking painting, and a painting is a mute poem” and—even more widely uttered—Horace’s somewhat ambiguous *ut pictura poesis*, suggesting that a poem either *is* or *should be* like a picture.<sup>14</sup>

Both before and after those strictures get laid down, there is hardly a single European authority on the subject of poems *or* pictures who doesn’t, explicitly or implicitly, interrelate their definitions. Socrates grounds his banishment of poets from the Republic on an argument that is really about painters and not about poets, while in the *Phaedrus* he declares writing to be analogous to painting in the context of a quite different argument.<sup>15</sup> Cicero in *De inventione* takes the Greek painter Zeuxis’ composite likeness of Helen of Troy (derived from the most beautiful features of five separate girls) to explain his own procedure in assembling a book of instructions for speech-making.<sup>16</sup> Quintilian uses the mannered qualities of Myron’s *Discobolus* statue to justify verbal *figura*, equating an upright body with literal speech and an artistically arranged body with elegant rhetorical variation.<sup>17</sup> Dante himself describes the highest form of divine communication as *visibile parlare*; Montaigne inaugurates his autobiographical project by announcing that he is *painting* himself (and later throws in the implication that it is a painting *in the nude*); Sir Philip Sidney, struggling among various metaphoric and metonymic descriptors for poetry, finally settles on a *speaking picture*; and Bacon calls words the “images of matter.”<sup>18</sup> Practitioners of the visual arts are just as likely as writers to summon up such rhetoric: Alberti refers to narrative paintings as *historiae*; Titian calls his mythological canvases *poesie*<sup>19</sup>; and countless individuals theorizing the making of pictures provide arguments that depend on yet another, similarly ambiguous, Horatian dictum, according to which “pictoribus atque poetis | quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas” (“poets and painters have always had an equal right to dare whatever they wished”).<sup>20</sup>

It is hardly surprising that this last pronouncement, which seemed to offer both kinds of creative artists oblique permission to transcend the limits of merely imitating what they found in nature, should turn up in the voices of both our hieroglyphical artists. In Francisco de Holanda's *Four Dialogues on Painting*, another possibly fanciful re-creation of artistic table talk, Michelangelo is made to quote Horace's lines (in Latin), and to discourse at length on the principle of the creative liberty that poets and painters share. Earlier in the same work, the conversants hammer home the idea of crossovers between the pictorial and the verbal arts, declaring, "You may read all Virgil and find nothing in him but the art of a Michelangelo."<sup>21</sup> In the case of Leonardo, we need no recourse to apocryphal utterances, as his notebook pages are covered with passionate praises for painting at the expense of poetry, pursuing arguments based on Horatian suppositions concerning both the freedoms and the restrictions that the *Ars poetica* had rendered central to theoretical debates about the nature of literature and the visual arts.<sup>22</sup> With or without Horace, it is safe to say that both Leonardo and Michelangelo were, were understood to be, and understood themselves to be, operating within an ancient and noble tradition in which the arts of word and picture were subject to complex interrelations.<sup>23</sup>

However those intricacies may be glimpsed in the pages that follow, we are concerned here with picture and text in a more straightforward sense, principally insofar as they can be found next to each other on the same sheets of paper. Not that this physical happenstance in itself constitutes a consistent or definable genre of artistic activity. Renaissance cultural production indeed abounds in cases where words and pictures are placed in this kind of proximity for what are clearly intentional efforts at both contrast and coordination. Cimabue's Pisa Crucifixion apparently included the text of angelic messages to the Virgin Mary, which, according to Vasari, proved that the artist "was starting to shed new light and to open the way to invention by expressing the meaning of his painting with the help of words."<sup>24</sup> At the other end of the period, we have the case of emblem books, and the whole iconographic tradition that lies behind them, where the combination of image and text on the same page—say, a picture of the transformed Actaeon and a poetic moralization concerning the dangers of harboring criminals (Figure 1-4)—has been carefully patterned in such a way that the two media operate in both divergence and complementarity.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the pages that provide the central exhibits in this book do not, for the



1-4.  
Alciati *Emblematum Liber*,  
Emblem LII, 1577



most part, emerge from that sort of aesthetic premeditation; they tend to be documents in artistic practice, the chance consequences of a creative mentality that spontaneously expressed itself in an unregulated mixture of visual and verbal inscriptions. If the hieroglyph counts as the emblem of this activity, it is not only because of its simultaneous associations with picture and word but also because the hieroglyph has historically signaled some fundamental mysteries of expression.

Kenneth Clark, it will be remembered, construed certain pieces of Leonardo's sketchwork—wordless ones, for the most part—as evidence of unconscious process: they are “images his hand created when his attention was wandering.” When we shift our attention to sheets with both picture and text in the same hand, not only does the term “hieroglyph” gain sharper relevance, but the question of conscious and unconscious takes on greater urgency. With those pages before us, we are able to see in what ways our two exemplars can be understood as parallel and in what ways Leonardo indicates rather by contrast why it is that Michelangelo's habit of writing words on his drawings merits a book of its own.

In all the most sophisticated accounts of the history of drawing, Leonardo's work counts as the threshold moment when Renaissance individualism found its triumphant way on to the sketchpad.<sup>26</sup> Draftsmanship, according to this timeline, was no longer solely occupied with the apprenticeship business of imitating pre-existing pattern books or with the attempt to nail down the future shape of a finished product, but rather became the truest expression of an inward vision. History is never so neat as such formulations, nor are great men so unique; still, David Rosand is quite right in his description of Leonardo's drawing as the “handwriting of the self;”<sup>27</sup> an expression that itself reminds us of connections to textual exercise. The inward turn implicit in Rosand's phrase is based in part on the fact that we possess many sheets with obsessively repeated and elegantly varied figures that point to no plausible commissioned project but, contrariwise, can often be connected to issues we may adduce from the artist's psyche, for which Freud laid down such interesting groundwork. Indeed, though Freud notably did not permit himself much speculation on this kind of drawing, Leonardo's work is filled with what Ernst Gombrich, and many subsequent scholars, have called “doodles”<sup>28</sup> (Figure 1-5), which is a key term in suggesting exactly the sort of aimless mental activity—beyond conscious control and potentially revealing of unconscious concerns—as Freud's own favorite sites of analysis: dreams, jokes, and slips of the tongue.



I-5.

Leonardo, two grotesque profiles confronted. Windsor RL12463. The Royal Collection, London

Not that Leonardo was so wholly *unconscious* of these matters. In fact, he discussed the relationship between draftsmanship and the self quite extensively in his notebooks. Among the most insistent themes in this vast treasure-house of written material is a set of strictures against what he takes to be the tendency of artists to represent their own features in their work. Leonardo's account of this practice, which had already by the fifteenth century been enshrined in the proverb "ogni dipintore dipinge sè" (every painter paints himself), proves to be far more than a complaint about insufficient variety in artists' ways of rendering physiognomy.<sup>29</sup> After reviewing the dangers of habitual and accidental self-portraiture and listing various inward characteristics that get involuntarily transferred from painter to painting along with facial features (including quickness of movement, devoutness, laziness, and madness), he speculates on the underlying principles:

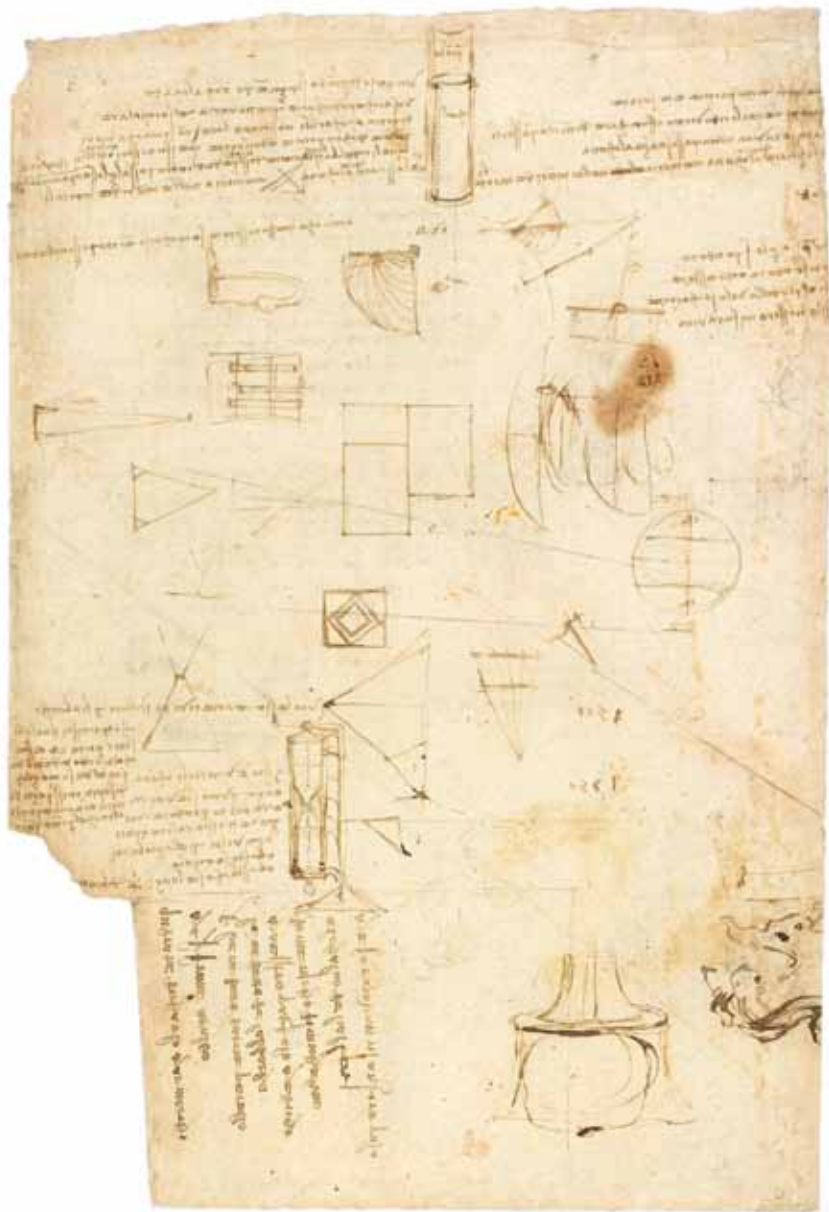
Having often considered the cause of this defect, it seems to me one must conclude that the soul which rules and directs each body is really that which forms our judgment *before it is our own*

*judgment*. Thus it has developed the whole shape of a man, as it has deemed to be best with long, or short, or flat nose, and definitely assigned his height and shape. The judgment is so powerful that it moves the painter's arm and makes him copy himself, since it seems to that soul that this is the true way to construct a man, and whoever does not do so, commits an error. (Emphasis mine)<sup>30</sup>

What had been a sort of mystical piece of medieval microcosmic lore becomes in these lines an object of scientific inquiry, and Leonardo answers his own question with a quite astonishing proposal. The idea that there is a force governing our bodies that guides “il nostro giuditio inanti sia il proprio giuditio nostro” is poised between Christian notions of a soul and psychological notions that the judgments we make—indeed, the very reality that we perceive—might be rooted in some kind of preconscious condition. And as Leonardo explores the mechanics of this proposition, he seems to have anticipated all the twentieth-century accounts of these artistic productions, crediting them directly to the “arm of the painter” (*move le braccia al pittore*) in such a way as to shortcircuit any sort of deliberate mental agency. Did Leonardo discover Freud's unconscious *avant la lettre*?

What is important here is not so much the possible protomodernity of this claim as the fact that the act of draftsmanship, which would traditionally be understood as operating between the externally determined imperatives of mimesis and the shaping intentions of an individual artist, is being subjected to a third—and more wayward—force, also connected to the individual, but not under his or her control. Equally significant, of course, is the fact that Leonardo finds this element in the mix to be quite threatening. (No surprise, given that the earliest citation we have about the self-replicating painter comes from the sermons of Savonarola.<sup>31</sup>) Unconscious process does not get credit in Leonardo's writings for brilliant invention or unique acts of genius; it is rather circumscribed into the realm of a somewhat deluded painterly narcissism. It has often been suggested, apropos of this set of caveats, that Leonardo was above all expressing anxiety about his own practice and that he was himself guilty of “ogni dipintore dipinge sè.”<sup>32</sup> Whatever the truth of that claim, it is clear that he practiced a kind of draftsmanship that was profoundly intimate and personal, and that, with whatever mix of self-consciousness, self-promotion, and self-castigation, he scrutinized that practice in ways that disclose his discomfort with his own habits.

1-6.  
Leonardo, miscellaneous instruments.  
Codex Atlanticus 12va. Biblioteca  
Ambrosiana, Milan



All of which might be said of Michelangelo as well. More so, in fact, and with a far greater consciousness of the unconscious, as well as a more positive valuation of it. In the case of Leonardo, there is a kind of paradox: on the one hand, he was a doodler; on the other hand, he was a thinker who aspired to the kind of systematic investigative processes that would eventually produce experimental science. In fact, it is often possible to map these oppositions precisely in terms of the relation between picture and text on



1-7.

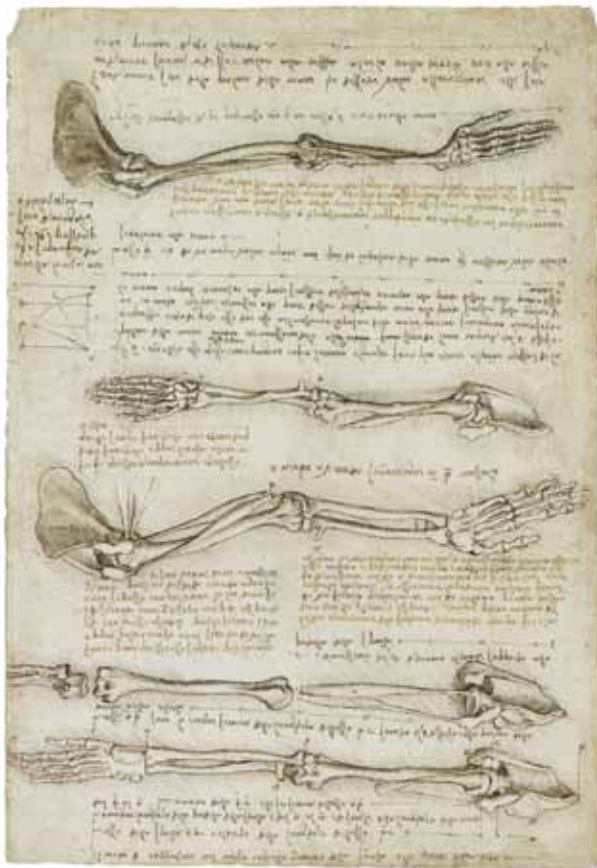
Leonardo, Arno drawing with memorial of his father's death. c. 1473. Uffizi, Florence

his manuscript pages. There are, to be sure, many cases where he scribbled either casual or irrelevant notations amidst his visual sketches, including the phrase *dimmi semmai fu fatto chose* ("tell me if ever the thing was done"), which appears on a number of early sketches, or the to-do list of bibliographical authorities inscribed in one corner of a sheet with mechanical instruments (Figure 1-6), or even the indication, placed a few centimeters above a landscape drawing (Figure 1-7), of the exact moment of his father's death (*a di di luglio 1504, mercoledì a ore 7. . .*), out of which Freud made so much.<sup>33</sup>

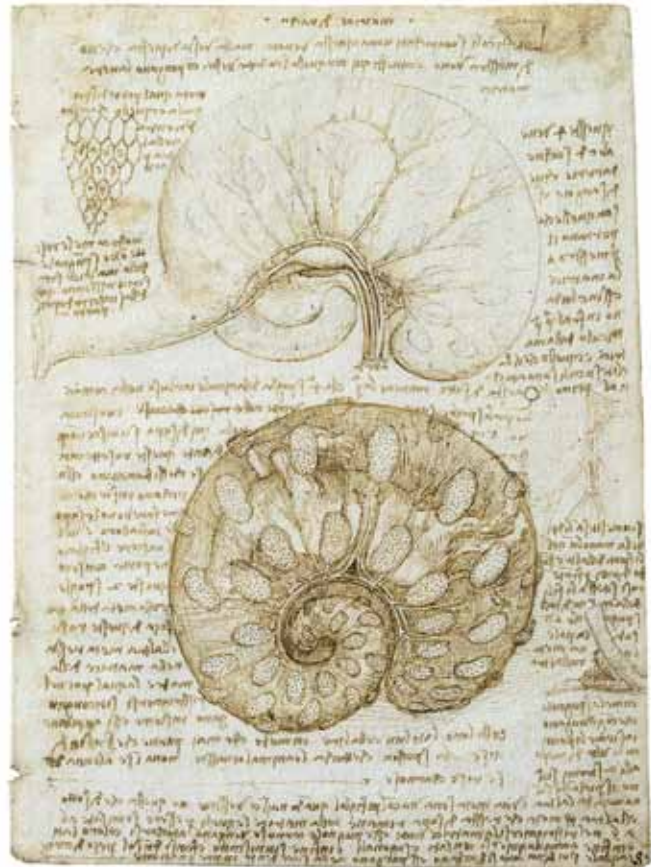
But the vast majority of the pages on which Leonardo set down both pictures and words—the documents that have made him famous for this kind of production—leave the impression of being anything but doodles. It would take a far bigger book than this one (and it is a book that has yet to be definitively written<sup>34</sup>) to do justice to the range of compositional forms among these thousands of sheets, and to the sorts of logic that underlie them. Sometimes descriptive text is exquisitely inlaid among the images to which it refers (Figure 1-8), while at other times the verbal component, though just as closely keyed to the picture, is squeezed haphazardly in what appear to be the figures' accidental surroundings (Figure 1-9). Sometimes the layout of word and image is as straightforwardly explanatory as in the most user-friendly of instruction manuals (Figure 1-10), while at other times the relationship is symbolic in the mode of emblems (Figure 1-11). Sometimes the words bespeak a strenu-



ous pedagogical purpose aimed at a hypothetical reader, who is to be further aided by the accompanying images (Figure 1-12), while at other times the amalgam is clearly intended for the artist's eyes only (Figure 1-13).<sup>35</sup> Yet what is common to all these cases is that image and text have been conceived as purposefully interrelated. Indeed, it is this double presence, however variously it emerges on the page, that nearly always signals the opposite of the doodle—that is, an attempt to make the kind of definitive statement about nature, technology, or art that requires both the mimetic or diagrammatic qualities of the picture and the discursive or descriptive qualities of the text to nail down the truth. With Michelangelo, the opposite is likelier to be the case: the juxtaposed figure and word tend rather to signal the artist's deepest uncertainties.



1-8.  
Leonardo, the bones of the arm. Windsor 19000v.  
The Royal Collection, London



1-9.  
Leonardo, uterus of a gravid cow. Windsor 19051r.  
The Royal Collection, London



Let us nevertheless hold that tantalizing claim momentarily in abeyance while we establish some sense of the archive in question. The numbers of pages on which Michelangelo composed both text and image are far smaller than those of Leonardo, but they are not inconsiderable. For statistical purposes, one has to begin with some notion of the grand total of extant autograph sheets, about which radical and noisy controversies have swirled for several decades, with estimates ranging as low as two hundred and as high as eight hundred.<sup>36</sup> If the present volume tends to abstain from these debates, it is at least in part because there has been far less controversy about the identification of Michelangelo's handwriting than about the attribution of his picture-making. That in itself points to some significant issues in the relations between word and image, suggesting that individuals



**I-10.**  
Leonardo, device for regulating springs.  
Madrid Codex I45r. Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid



**I-11.**  
Leonardo, two emblems. Windsor 12701.  
The Royal Collection, London



are architectural drawings, and it may be argued that the inclusion of words in the middle of building diagrams is so inevitable as not to prove anything about the habits of a particular artist (though I am not alone in doubting this general proposition).<sup>37</sup> It must also be pointed out that another subset of the two hundred consists of pages from manuscripts principally devoted to poetry.<sup>38</sup> If we were to include *all* poetry sheets in the total, the count would exceed six hundred, and the proportion of those with both words and pictures would drop. On the other hand, if we focus on the literary production itself, it emerges that something like 25 percent of the poems appear at some point on manuscript pages in the company of drawings.<sup>39</sup> In short, no matter how one crunches the numbers, Michelangelo's habit of inscribing both kinds of marks in close proximity on the same sheets is, let us say, striking.

It is also the case that this conjunction has attracted relatively little notice. To be sure, there have been magisterial cataloguing projects focussed upon individual collections of the drawings, like those of Johannes Wilde at the British Museum, Paola Barocchi at the Uffizi and the Casa Buonarroti, and Paul Joannides at the Louvre and the Ashmolean, in which the autograph texts have been rigorously transcribed with the same kind of care as has been lavished on the figural work.<sup>40</sup> Still, it cannot be denied that the traditions of art historical connoisseurship as regards this body of work vastly privilege pictures over words. To cite a notable example, while Charles de Tolnay's *Corpus dei disegni* (indispensable and supremely authoritative in many ways) succeeds in documenting the minutest details of each sheet's pictorial contents, only in rare cases do the entries include transcription or discussion of text.<sup>41</sup> Things are not much different on the literary side: Enzo Noè Girardi's exhaustive edition of the poetic texts—still the benchmark in this field, though half a century old—includes every possible variant in Michelangelo's many verbal revisions but relegates the presence of adjacent sketches to brief footnotes.<sup>42</sup>

The issue is not merely about whether picture scholars mention words or word scholars mention pictures; the question is the extent to which these diverse expressions have been construed as part of a single vision of Michelangelo. Needless to say, the vast scholarship on this most widely studied of artists has by no means ignored the fact that we possess an uncommon (indeed, for an early modern individual, almost unique) quantity of verbal documentation, both in his hand and as recorded by those who were close to him. But perhaps because Michelangelo lived a life in which artistic production and personal biography played them-

selves out so conspicuously together and because this interlocking narrative was so tempestuous—even novelistic—it has been irresistible to focus our attention on the ways in which his inscriptions on paper might be useful in determining the facts. This has applied both to sketches and to writings: a drawing that can be associated with a particular finished product teaches us something about the process that led to that product, and a verbal notation may provide similar clues. Where no such clear genealogy can be posited, the page has proved less interesting.

There is every reason why scholarship has utilized materials in that sort of teleological way. But it is also rather limiting. It is impossible (at least for me) to survey the archive of Michelangelo's work without realizing that on many occasions he produced drawings without having any preconceived goal. Indeed, that may have been his most characteristic state of mind as he sat with pen or chalk in front of a sheet of paper, whether he was contemplating a live model or a wax form or nothing other than his own mental picture gallery. And if that was true when he sketched images, it was even more true when he scribbled words. The fact is that in most cases he was *not* producing these sheets of paper by way of rational purposiveness: we therefore need models for reading them that allow for something more than a narrative of progress toward deliberate goals of artistic production, on projects like the Sistine Ceiling, the Julius Tomb, or the San Lorenzo façade, which (admittedly, for all sorts of good reasons) have dominated the historiography of his life.

It will require the whole of this book to frame these alternative models of reading, but it seems appropriate to begin exactly where we left off with Leonardo. If, in that case, the conjunction of picture and word is a sign of deliberate and conscious efforts at expression, for Michelangelo it signals rather the most private, inward, and (indeed) hieroglyphic of moments. One final set of comparisons—on Leonardo's turf, as it were.

Some of Leonardo's most haunting compositions in word and image are those sheets on which he intersperses drawings of the human body with a variety of musings on its structure and on the means whereby it can be graphically or aesthetically reproduced. A Windsor sheet (Figure 1-14), for instance, inscribes several brief essays about the functioning of muscles, bones, and cartilage between and around two very beautiful representations of the leg. On another page (Figure 1-15), the drawing once again concentrates on the muscles, but the writing operates in a more directly pedagogical mode, urging artists to draw human legs by reference to those of frogs.<sup>43</sup> The stunning visual composition of yet another sheet

(Figure I-16) houses a dozen texts that offer minute accounts of the human shoulder, urging the necessity of understanding its deep structure in order to render it artistically. But the first piece of writing on the page (in Leonardo's backwards orientation, the upper right) seems intended neither for professional anatomists nor for professional artists; rather, it registers some striking introspection about the very composite medium that Leonardo is (essentially) inventing:

And you who wish to use words to reveal the shape of man with all aspects of his articulation, abandon any such expectation, because, the more minutely you do your description, the more you will confuse the mind of the reader and the more the reader will lose any recognition of the thing you are describing. Therefore it is necessary both to draw and to describe.<sup>44</sup>



I-14.  
Leonardo, *écorché* drawings of legs. Windsor 19035v.  
The Royal Collection, London



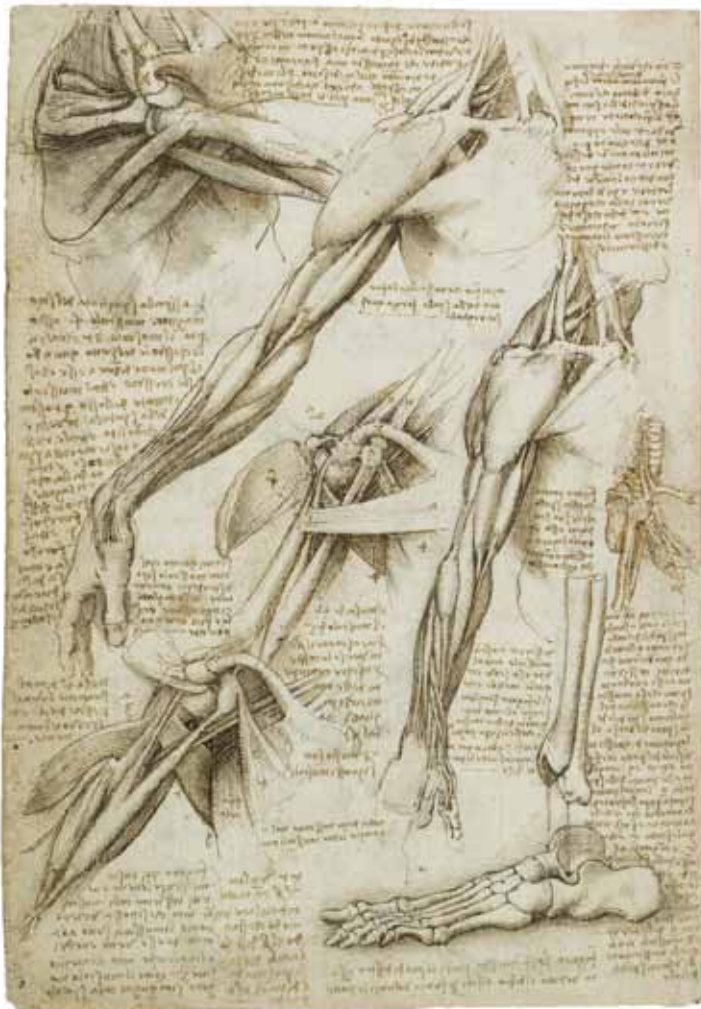
I-15.  
Leonardo, a nude man from the waist down.  
Windsor 12631r. The Royal Collection, London



Not only did he understand that his project depended on the interplay of picture and word; he was, in fact, theorizing this relationship. Indeed, he seems to approach this matter with a kind of deconstructive self-consciousness, given his claim that the more words one uses, the less one succeeds in communicating, a notion that sits intriguingly with the fact that he has squeezed in several hundred words on this sheet. All these intricate multimedia compositions can leave no doubt about the grand scope of Leonardo's undertaking. Whether he was imagining a magnificent publication or engaging in some fanatically complete monument for his eyes only,<sup>45</sup> his efforts reveal the ambition to produce a *magnum opus*, virtual or actual, that would interlace art, science, and the human condition across a grid on which language stood (*in bono*, but more often *in malo*) for the realm of cognition and picture stood for experience.

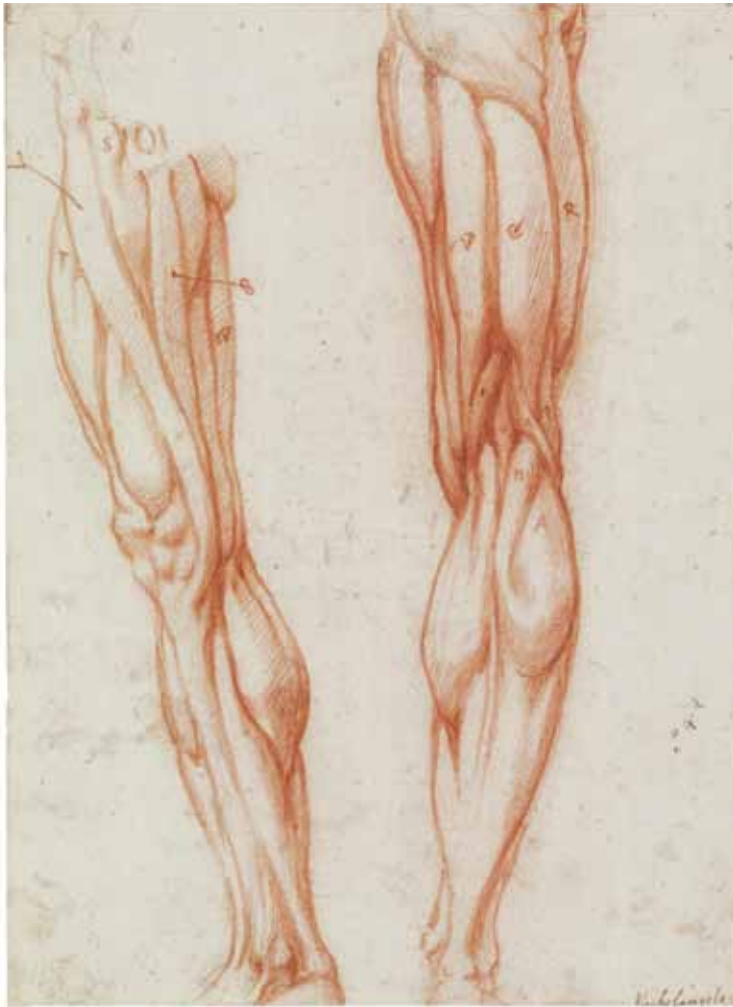
**1-16.**

Leonardo, the muscles of the shoulder and arm, and the bones of the foot.  
Windsor 19013v. The Royal Collection,  
London



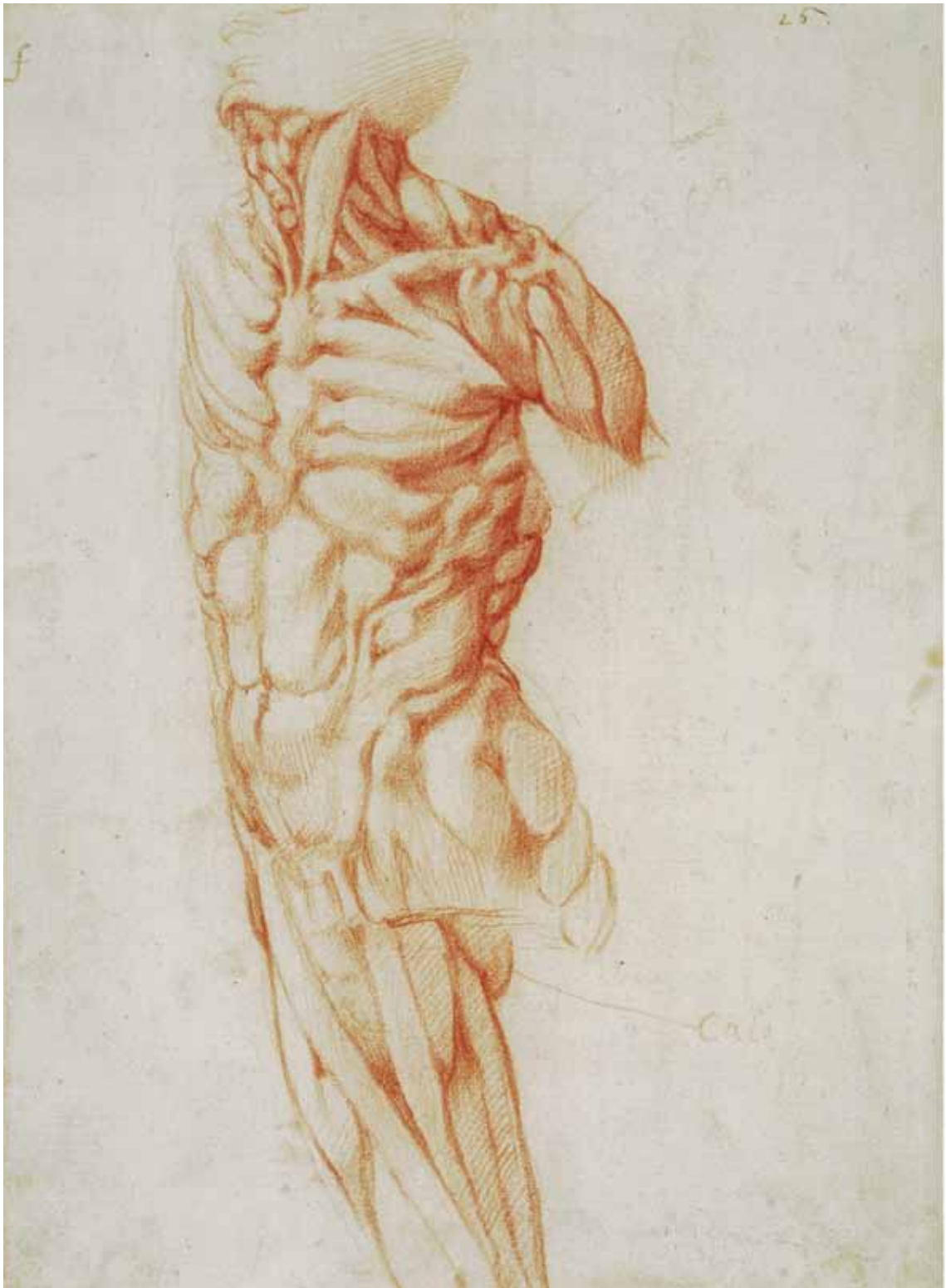


Though the biographical materials inform us frequently that Michelangelo dissected human and animal corpses, his production of anatomical drawings does not begin to equal those of Leonardo.<sup>46</sup> Nor, despite promises made to both Vasari and Condivi about a book on human proportion, did he ever produce anything like the quantity of text that the elder artist devoted to these subjects. We do, however, possess some examples, particularly a set of *écorché* studies, mostly in red chalk, now dispersed between Windsor Castle and the Teylers Museum.<sup>47</sup> Some of these (Figure 1-17) include tiny initials pointing to individual muscles, in the fashion of a textbook anatomical illustration, which suggests that they may have formed part of a notebook intended for artistic instruction. The project might be said to recall Leonardo, but if the draftsmanly style is quite different, the relation to language diverges even more. One does not



1-17.

Michelangelo, *écorché* drawing,  
*Corpus* 114r. Windsor 0624.  
 The Royal Collection, London



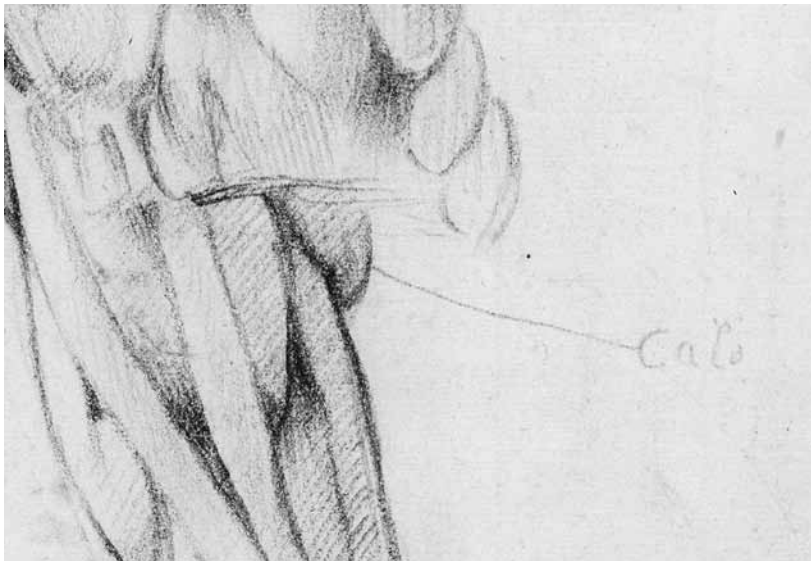
at first notice that the intricately muscled neck, torso, and right leg of a figure seen from the left side (Figure 1-18) includes the artist's handwriting. But on close inspection it becomes clear that there are two fine lines leading out from the body (like those attached to some of the single letters on Figure 1-17); then one sees that these do, in fact, point to text. Off the shoulder appears the word *braco* (arm); off a spot just below where the left leg is cut short appears the word *culo* (ass) (Figure 1-19).

If, in a volume that will ultimately consider a large body of Michelangelo drawings with his handwriting on them, I begin with this robustly vernacular instance, it is not in order to make a definitive hypothesis about his motives. We cannot be certain why the artist chose to accompany a beautifully finished piece of drawing with a couple of words that were superfluous, frivolous, and—perhaps most striking, because it will prove to be unusual—in a highly informal version of his handwriting. It is tempting to reconstruct a rollicking studio atmosphere in which the Master produced the visual object for sober pedagogical purposes and then added text in order to make fun of the whole enterprise. It would be even more risky (though equally tempting) to conjecture that he was parodying the compositions of that elder colleague who had created such a grandiose word-and-image monument out of human anatomy. Whatever Michelangelo was doing, *my* purpose is to set these two artists' practices against each other—the one based on a massive cognitive and heuristic scheme, the other a mysterious in-joke.

1-18. (*facing*)

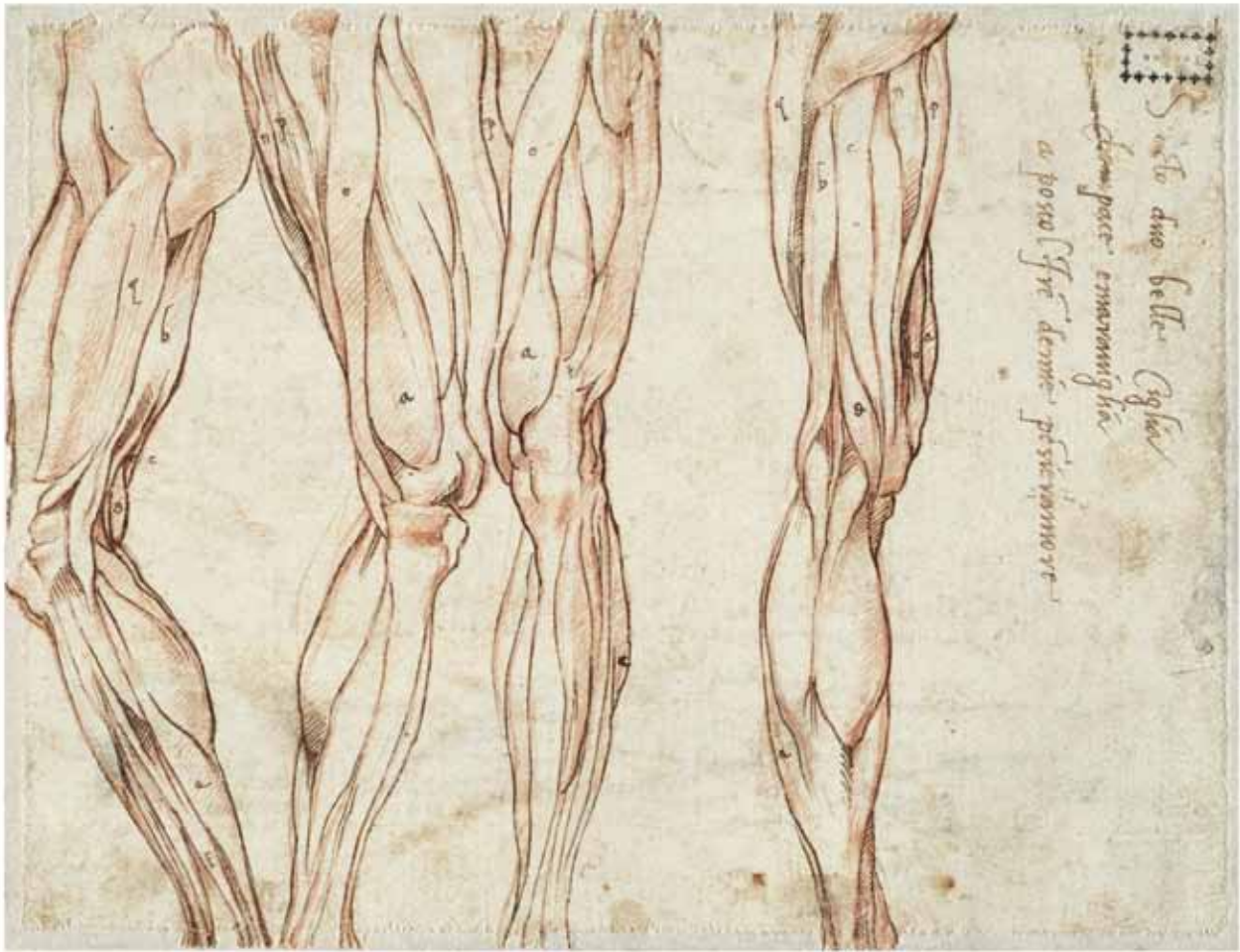
Michelangelo, *écorché* drawing, *Corpus* 112r. Windsor o803.

The Royal Collection, London



1-19.

Detail of Figure 1-18



1-20.  
Michelangelo, *écorché* drawing,  
*Corpus IIIv*. Teylers Museum  
Haarlem, the Netherlands

The mystery only deepens when we consider the other anatomical drawing that contains text. In this case (Figure 1-20), probably from the same notebook, the red chalk is augmented with brown ink, and individual parts of the anatomy are in fact labeled with initials. The recto has been used in vertical orientation for a series of arms and hands, while the work on the verso, which notably recalls the leg muscle drawings of Leonardo, seems to have been executed in horizontal orientation. But adjacent to those drawings, and in the vertical positioning, Michelangelo has composed three lines of verse (Figure 1-21):

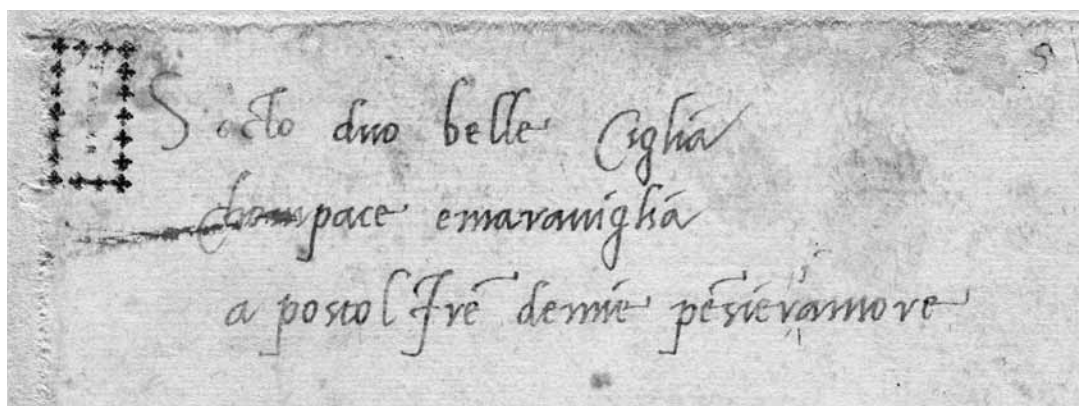
Socto duo belle ciglia  
chom pace e meraviglia  
a posto 'l fren de' mie pensieri amore.

Under two beautiful eyebrows  
 With peace and wonderment  
 Love has placed the brakes on my thoughts.<sup>48</sup>

The handwriting here is far more elegant than that which appeared on the Windsor drawing, as is the sentiment. The scribbled *braco* and *culo*, though stylistically incongruous next to the beautifully composed body parts, were semantically in perfect alignment with them; the relationship of image and word here is quite the opposite: they appear to have absolutely nothing to do with each other. Less than nothing, one might say, since the juxtaposition of four legs with two eyebrows touches on the absurd. It is easy enough to dismiss this field of possible connections and say that Michelangelo liked to use sheets of paper for more than one purpose, hence producing combinations that were mere happenstance. In some sense, this is true, and many succeeding instances in this volume will revisit these questions.<sup>49</sup> But there is no denying the fact that the artist deliberately rotated and flipped the sheet, such that, however random his various activities might have been, some of them were produced in the presence of the others. That is as far as we can go with this particular bit of the archive. For the moment, let us merely say that on this pair of anatomical sheets we can observe the Leonardo project being attacked on two fronts: in one case, the text is preposterously superfluous, in the other preposterously irrelevant. So far, though, both Michelangelo pages seem to suggest that we have little to learn from analyzing his habit of writing words on his drawings.

1-21.

Detail of Figure 1-20







1-22.

Michelangelo, interior of the chapel with the Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici. Medici Chapels, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence

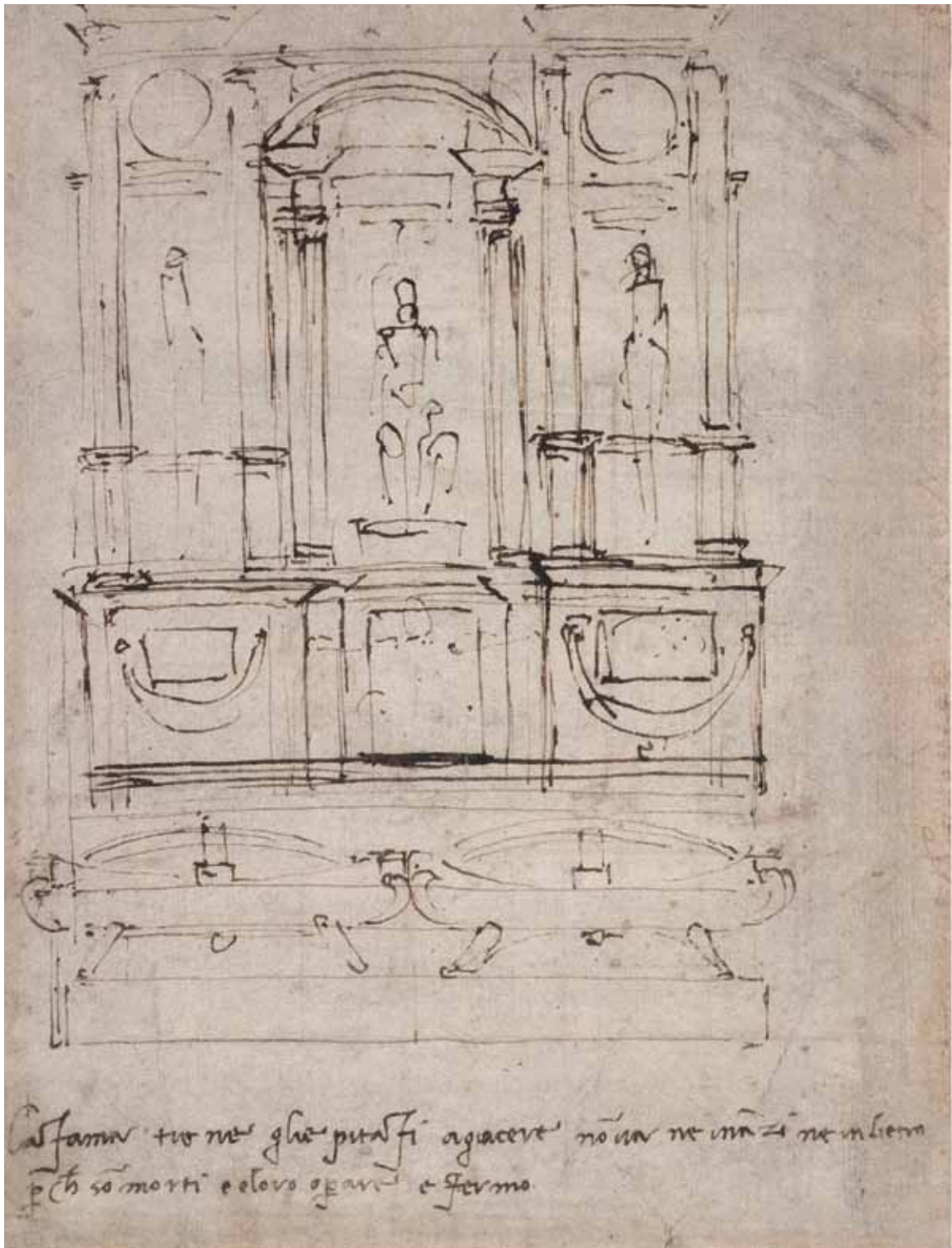
1-23. (*facing*)

Michelangelo, drawing for Medici Tombs, *Corpus* 189r. BM 1859-5-14-823. British Museum, London

What happens, on the other hand, when we look at the kind of sheet whose conjunction of picture and word promises a great deal? During the 1520s, Michelangelo devoted enormous energy to filling the New Sacristy in San Lorenzo with a constantly evolving architectural project that was slated to contain tombs for Medici princes (Figure 1-22).<sup>50</sup> The undertaking was bound to be in flux, since the potential honorees were variously living, dead, and becoming pope, and since both the artist and his patrons were engaging in lively ongoing discussions about the shape, size, and placement of the tombs. From this cauldron of activity, we have a considerable number of drawings; two of these, almost uniquely in the entire archive of Michelangelo's works on paper, contain texts in his handwriting that actually seem to record his thoughts—perhaps one could even say *intentions*—as he was conceiving the work.

A British Museum drawing (Figure 1-23), generally taken to be rather early in the chapel's planning stages and probably representing tombs for two Medici princes (Lorenzo il Magnifico and his brother Giuliano) who were not included in the eventual work as we have it, reveals a multistory wall tomb with columns, pilasters, statues, tablets,





and decorative swags, in front of which sit two side-by-side sarcophagi.<sup>51</sup> Below the drawing, and in the same ink, Michelangelo has written:

la fama tiene gli epitafi a giacere non va ne inanzi ne indietro  
perche son morti e eloro operare e fermo<sup>52</sup>

If I do not proceed directly to a translation, it is because the meaning of this utterance—indeed, even the order in which we are to read its clauses—is heavily disputed. One possible English version would read:

Fame holds the epitaphs in place; she goes neither forward nor  
backward  
because they are dead, and their work is stilled.

Most of the disagreement centers on the expression *tiene . . . a giacere*, here translated as “holds in place” but which could also mean “holds reclining,” “holds in suspension,” “holds in death,” or (perhaps most probably) “renders useless.” It is also possible that *non va inanzi ne indietro* is to be read as the final, rather than the middle clause, in which case it is not Fame that is immobile but rather their work. I offer no definitive reading, but rather two observations. First of all, the obscurity of the statement is as fundamental as any possible clarification; in other words, this text was neither composed for explanatory purposes, nor probably for any eyes other than the artist’s own. Secondly, whatever it meant in Michelangelo’s head, the words clearly have something to do with the physical form of the monument as he was developing it. However we understand *giacere*, it is a verb commonly used for the reclining position of the dead (as in the ubiquitous Latin tag *hic iacet . . .*), even though it here seems to refer to the epitaphs rather than to the corpses. And, so far as Fame and the epitaphs are concerned, there is indeed a very sketchy figure at the center of the lower story who appears to be holding out its hands toward two tablets that might contain some sort of memorial text, though they certainly do not in this or any other version of the monument. In that very broad, and murky, sense, the words may describe the picture.

We shall return to this drawing, but let us now consider the other annotated sketch that can be associated with this project (Figure 1-24).<sup>53</sup> I use deliberately cautious language because, on visual grounds alone, the work on this sheet has only a conjectural connection to the Medici Tombs. In fact, there is a curious interplay between verbal and visual

1-24. (*facing*)

Michelangelo, drawing  
for Medici Tombs, *Corpus* 2011.  
Casa Buonarroti 10A.  
Casa Buonarroti, Florence

el cielo

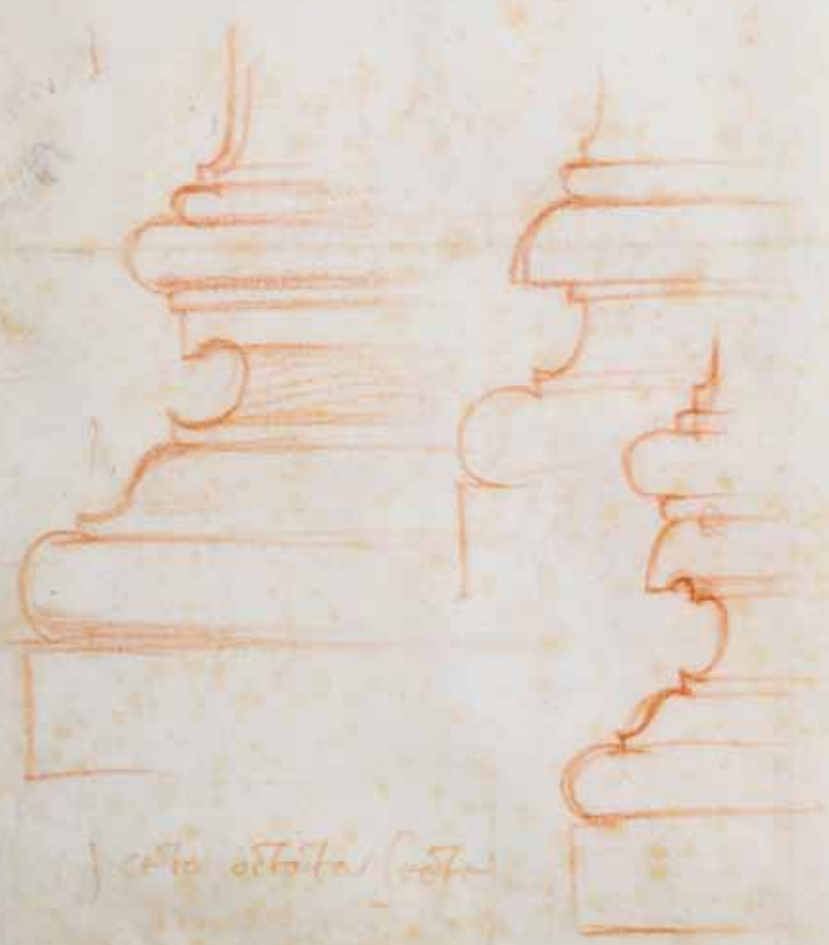
el laterra

76

el cielo

el laterra

e lli elamete per lano edichano noi abiano chelno stro uolao cherso lue  
 ste allamero el ducha guhano e bo gusto Et ero facci ue dcha chome fa  
 el a u dcha e questa di mundo noi amato lui lui chosi e ue to lla la  
 luce amoi e choglio chi hiasi u serato enostri Et no ni splendo pu so  
 pra la terra Et arrebbe di noi di Et facto me tra in uea



el cielo octata (octa)

inscriptions here. The column bases, along with the written out number *one hundred and eighty seven* (whatever that may indicate), are in red chalk, while the long text is in ink; the words *el cielo* and *la terra* (“heaven” and “earth”) are each written twice, once in ink and once in red chalk. Out of all this material, only the paragraph of writing has explicit relevance to the funerary monument:

El Di e la Notte parlano, e dicono: —Noi abbiamo col nostro veloce corso condotto alla morte el duca Giuliano; è ben giusto che e' ne facci vendetta come fa. E la vendetta è questa: che avendo noi morto lui, lui così morto ha tolto la luce a noi e cogli occhi chiusi ha serrato e' nostri, che non risplendon più sopra la terra. Che arrebbe di noi dunche fatto, mentre viva?

Day and Night speak and say: “We, in our swift course, have led Duke Giuliano to his death; it is only fair that he should take revenge on us as he does. And his revenge is this: Having been killed by us, he, being dead, has deprived us of light, and by closing his eyes has shut ours, which no longer shine upon the earth. What might he have done with us, then, if he had lived?”<sup>54</sup>

The words signal something like the final phase in the work's development: by this time it is the Dukes who are buried here, and their monument is adorned with statues including Day and Night (Figure 1-25). Though the text seems to offer a more direct account of underlying iconographic meaning than the words that appeared on the British Museum drawing, it is hardly any less enigmatic.

Those who have attempted to penetrate the obscurity of any of these utterances have sought an explanation that would embrace both picture and word at the same time as it mapped a distinctive stage in the artist's developing conception of the work and helped give iconographic meaning to the final form. This is a wholly worthwhile undertaking, to be sure, but it fails to consider the radically disjunctive nature of all the work on these (and so many other) sheets. Let us take the relatively simple case of *heaven* and *earth*. It is quite reasonable to associate this pair of terms with the conspicuously up-and-down structure common to nearly all stages of the monument's development. It is also clear that there is some connection between that duality and the quartet of *Day*, *Night*, *Dusk*, and *Dawn*, which are sculpted in the Chapel as we have it today; indeed, the relations are made rather explicit in the Giannotti



I-25.

Michelangelo, *Day and Night*,  
Medici Tombs. Tomb of Giuliano de  
Medici. Medici Chapels, New Sacristy,  
San Lorenzo, Florence

dialogues we cited earlier concerning the time Dante spent in Hell.<sup>55</sup> But if we look at these words as they actually appear on the page—according them, as it were, the same visual privileges that images receive—it becomes more difficult to nail down their signification. As it turns out, the relationship of *cielo* to *terra* is conspicuously horizontal rather than vertical. The vertical relationship is, by contrast, between *cielo* and *cielo* and between *terra* and *terra*; and both of these units exist in an alternation of mediums, first ink and then red chalk, followed by the longer text and then the drawing, also first in ink and then in red chalk.

We cannot determine from these stray words what is in Michelangelo's mind. And the more extensive piece of writing, though less fragmen-

tary in both form and substance, can scarcely be considered any more definitive as a basis for reading the eventual visual object. Clearly, the artist is thinking in a traditional mode of celebrating great men and mourning their passing via the conceit of an exchange between the living and the dead. We might compare the precisely contemporaneous Raphael epitaph, attributed to Cardinal Bembo, according to which Nature has herself perished in respectful—and, indeed, resentfully competitive—reaction to the artist's death:

Ille hic est Raphael timuit quo sospite vinci  
rerum magna parens et moriente mori.

This is that Raphael, by whom in life  
Our mighty mother Nature feared defeat;  
And in whose death did fear herself to die.<sup>56</sup>

In the case of the Medici, what is being mourned is the passing not of creativity but of sovereignty; as a consequence, the forces threatened by this instance of human mortality are those cosmic units which (again, in Dantean mode) govern the structures of earthly time. And, given that, like Raphael's, this death was understood as notably premature, this same conceit allows for a final compliment suggesting that the decedent would have gained supremacy even over immortal powers had he survived.

For me, it is not so much that all these various words *explain* the form or meaning of the Medici Tombs; at issue, rather, is Michelangelo's search for a medium of expression. I am struck, first of all, by the fact that this account of Day and Night does not appear on a sheet where the artist is sketching figurative sculpture at all. Whatever the order of writing and drawing on this page may have been—and this is a topic that will stimulate and perplex throughout the present volume—it is equally clear both that the various inscriptions are spatially interlocked *and* that they do not stand in a logical relationship to each other. Architecture, in other words, is not the place where Michelangelo can readily send out messages about death, immortality, and the governing forces of the universe.

Which brings up the question of where the artist *can* send out such messages. There is a larger conceit in these lines, apart from the exchange of the living and the dead, a conceit far closer to Michelangelo's heart. The notion of speaking statues has far too long a history to be recounted



here,<sup>57</sup> but it should be noted that within this very same Medici Chapel there was eventually to be a famous exchange, in which Giovanni di Carlo Strozzi, punning on the artist's name, praised the *Night* as having been "sculpted by an Angel"; he celebrated her as being so close to real life that, if the viewer should awaken her, she would speak.<sup>58</sup> That poem was written in the third person, but in response Michelangelo himself took a cue from this possibility and composed in her voice an attack—paradoxically, given the purposes of the Chapel—on Medici rule:

Caro m'è il sonno, e più l'esser di sasso,  
 mentre che 'l danno e la vergogna dura;  
 non veder, non sentir, m'è gran ventura;  
 però non mi destar, deh, parla basso.

Dear to me is sleep, dearer still being made of stone, while harm  
 and shame last; not to see, not to hear, to me is a great boon; so  
 do not waken me, ah, speak but softly.

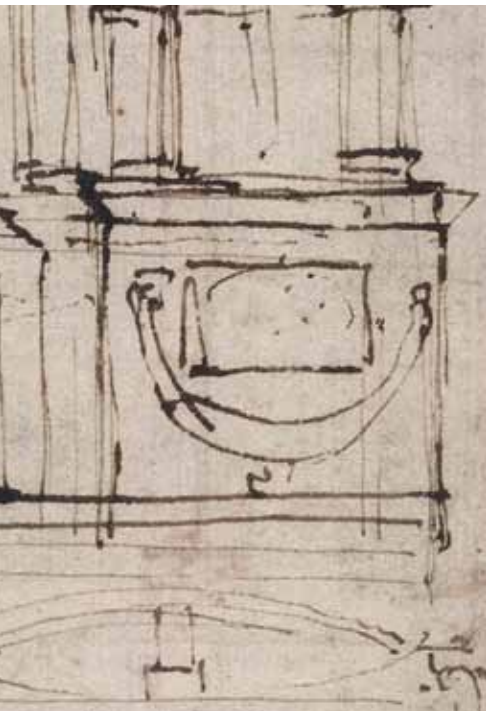
According to this version of the conceit, the statue *could* speak but, in effect, uses speech to refuse speech. And that, I think, is the heart of the matter. What is, in the end, most striking about Michelangelo's piece of writing is the utter impossibility that any statue, however powerfully sculpted, could possibly communicate something as semantically complex as the text he has committed to paper on their behalf. Indeed, even in language, it proves quite difficult to get the drift of it. So, rather than focusing on the ways in which this document is the underlying intention behind the finished art object, we should consider the moment in which this page was produced as one in which Michelangelo was painfully aware of the alienation of one element of his art from the other, of the gap between inarticulate architecture and the sculpted human figure, seemingly endowed with the power of speech and yet doomed in real life to stony silence. Which, I think, explains the final caprice on the page (Figure 1-26), the little doodle in which the artist metamorphoses one of the column bases into a grotesque open-mouthed profile. Having composed these textual messages on a drawing that lacks organs of speech, Michelangelo goes on to complete the joke by providing the antic face of a figure who could actually utter them.

This may also help us to explain why Michelangelo is worrying about the epitaphs on the other Medici Tomb-related sheet. Here, in a sense, the relations are more orderly than in the later drawing: the text appears

1-26.

Detail of Figure 1-24





1-27.  
Detail of Figure 1-23

like a caption under a sketch to which it is evidently connected; and the issues are simpler, since the artist does not yet seem to have imagined an iconographic system beyond the Virgin Mary, patron saints, and the unrepresented bodies of the dead. But once again the question of language troubles him—in particular, its role in the enterprise of commemoration. The final version of the work, it should be recalled, contains no celebratory text (not even the names of the deceased), nor does it make any attempt at accurately representing the two physiognomies. In fact, it is reported that the artist was criticized for failing to provide lifelike portraits, to which he replied, “In a thousand years, no one will know what they looked like,” suggesting a far greater immortality for his work than for the persons he was hired to celebrate.<sup>59</sup> At this earlier stage of the project, however, he is not imagining any representation of the two subjects at all—merely elaborate catafalques—but he has left rectangular spaces above each of them for some sort of dedicatory writing (Figure 1-27).

Yet these spaces remain empty, and instead his verbal composition on the sheet is devoted to a convoluted meditation on the possible operations of text within the monument. Perhaps it is no coincidence that he has used the same verb for the epitaphs as that which tombs generally use for dead bodies. If the epitaphs are themselves reclining, or buried, or rendered useless, that speaks to the artist’s complex relation to text. In both of these drawings, in fact, language insists on its presence in the creative process, but it also refuses to find a comfortable place in the design. The empty memorial tablet of the first sketch and the bizarre open-mouthed gargoyle of the second may stand as emblems for the restless relation of word and image that we will observe throughout Michelangelo’s career and, indeed, at the very heart of it.