Big Idea & Exhibition Synopsis

The drawings of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), one of history’s preeminent artists, reveal a new understanding of him as a creator who endured struggles, disappointment, and even defeat. In the 19th-century, Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), who considered Michelangelo an artist mentor, experienced similar challenges. The exhibition questions notions of artistic “genius” by spotlighting the everyday labors, less positive, and occasionally painful realities of any creative process.

Students and teachers will have a unique opportunity to view thirty preliminary drawings and studies by this Renaissance master, works that are rarely shown in North America. Ten sculptures by Rodin will complement the two-dimensional works from the Casa Buonarroti collection, in Florence. In addition, episodes from the everyday lives of both Michelangelo and Rodin will inform an appreciation of their artistry.

The exhibition is organized into four sections:

1. **AMBITION** introduces Michelangelo’s drive to succeed and his competitive nature through eight drawings. Rodin’s comparable resolve is represented by *The Thinker*, a component of the artist’s most complex work, *The Gates of Hell*.

2. **SEARCH FOR PERFECTION** is about those moments of experimentation, inquiry, and play, when artists make choices and rule out less desirable option. This phase of creative action will be presented through ten drawings and a Rodin sculpture.

3. **STRUGGLE and DEFIANCE** examines the roles of criticism, disappointment, and perseverance in the lives and careers of our featured artists. Both Michelangelo’s and Rodin’s works reveal how each managed to maintain their personal values and direction, even during times of adversity.

4. **UNFULFILLED PROJECTS and DREAMS** will focus on projects and commissions that remain unfinished or were never begun. A *Madonna and Child*, by Michelangelo, and Rodin’s *Adam and Eve*, originally created for his largely unfinished *Gates of Hell*, are key works in this section.

Vocabulary

bronze casting, chiaroscuro, creative process, humanism, idealism, linear perspective, naturalism, orders of architecture, patron, sanguine, serpentine figure
Art in Context

**Italian High Renaissance Art (1480 – 1520)**

**SUBJECT MATTER**
- Christian (Catholic) religious subjects dominate, though a renewed interest in ancient mythology; encroaching secularism & scientific knowledge (humanism)
- true landscape painting is introduced
- portraits capture psychological insights and status
- renewed interest in accurate human anatomy and the nude
- mood of calmness, serenity, and dignity

**MEDIA TECHNIQUES**
- oil painting/tempera on wooden panels or canvas; fresco painting continues
- drawings as preliminary studies
- figural sculpture in stone, wood, terracotta
- architects appropriate elements from classical orders of Greece and Rome; Alberti’s ideas of ideal human proportions, symmetry, and formal unity dominate; Brunelleschi’s insistence on basic geometric shapes; persistence of the circular or central plan for buildings (Bramante & Palladio); decoration is subordinate to the overall visual effect

**VISUAL DESIGN**
- triangular or pyramidal compositions
- monumental (larger-than-life) figures
- nudes concerned with ideal beauty & perfection; eroticism downplayed in deference to religious values
- use of chiaroscuro (modeling from light to dark) & sfumato (smokey haze modeling)
- linear perspective and foreshortening are used to simulate spatial realism; viewer’s implied POV is central and singular; aerial perspective creates an illusion of distance
- symmetrical arrangements; compact groupings of figures that remain in foreground (stage-like); shallow perspective backgrounds help emphasize the figures

- art elements/design principles counteract one another, i.e. verticals vs. horizontals; movement vs. counter-movement or stillness
- intense colours isolated by earth tones; gold leaf used for symbolic decoration
- harmonious, ideal, controlled

**Drawing**
was routine for Michelangelo. As a young boy, he was punished for drawing on every surface in his house; while an apprentice, he tried to correct the drawings of his master. Michelangelo’s drawings document his life-time artistry; over 600 exist in collections, including Casa Buonarroti and The Queen’s Collection, Windsor Castle. His drawings are often divided into three categories: sketches and studies, preparation for other artworks; finished, “autonomous” drawings, artworks in their own right; and “presentation” drawings, those graphic images that were given as gifts, to wealthy patrons or artist colleagues. In his time, Michelangelo’s drawings were highly sought-after, as they are today, but he refused to sell them and even resorted to burning some, shortly before his death, to keep their ideas from being stolen. Some were done on any extant scrap he could find; a number have drawings on both sides (verso).

**The creative process**, as defined in the *Ontario Curriculum (2010, pp. 14-16)*, is composed of multiple stages which are not necessarily sequential, but often overlap or are revisited (with student self-reflection occurring throughout):
- **Challenge & Inspire**
- **Imagine & Generate**
- **Plan & Focus**
- **Explore & Experiment**
- **Produce Preliminary Work**
- **Revise & Refine**
- **Present & Perform**
- **Reflect & Evaluate**
Though he was a citizen of the 19th-century and wholly dedicated to the human figure as subject, August Rodin is generally credited with inventing modern sculpture. His innovations include: incorporating accidental and chance incidents into his work; using body fragments and recycled body parts or multiples; integrating spectator and sculptural space by eliminating the pedestal; and investing figures with multiple meanings, both particular and general. Although he was heavily influenced by Michelangelo and classical sculpture, Rodin’s figures present a greater sense of naturalism, and capture emotional states through motion and pose.

“A person does not have entire mastery until the end of life.”
Michelangelo

Connections & Responses

Personal responses
The following questions attempt to establish more intimate connections between students and Michelangelo’s and Rodin’s art. These inquiry questions can solicit initial reactions, before the exhibition, OR inspire reflection and more extended study of the artworks, during or following the exhibition.

- When working with others, are you more collaborative or competitive?
- Find an artwork that surprises you.
- Do you ever notice the architecture of buildings? What attracts or intrigues or frustrates you about some human-built spaces?
- If you had the opportunity to design your own home, what would it look like, and why?
- Find an artwork that puzzles or intrigues you. What question(s) might you ask the artist, if you could?

Same Difference: Compare some of Michelangelo’s drawings/studies to their corresponding completed works. How are they similar, developed or altered? For example, Study of a Man’s Face, for the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (1509-1510) can be compared to the final version of the man clinging to the tree, on the left side of The Deluge or Flood, from the Sistine Chapel ceiling; Various Studies for the Staircase of the Library of San Lorenzo, Column Bases and Figures (c.1525) can show Michelangelo’s design thinking for the Laurentian Library entrance, in Florence; and Studies for the Head of Leda (c.1630) becomes a bit of a mystery as a rare remaining evidence for Michelangelo’s lost painting of Leda and the Swan (c.1530), of which The National Gallery in London has a copy, attributed to Rosso Fiorentino.

Twisted Mister/Sister: The “figura serpentinata,” or serpentine figure, is a description – supposedly invented by Michelangelo – that refers to the curving lines and forms used to depict human figures. Like the contrapposto of classical figures, the artist was searching for a way to capture the dynamism of life-like movement, in static forms. Have students examine Michelangelo’s drawings like Nude Seen from the Back and Study for Christ in Limbo (c.1532-33), as well as Rodin’s sculptures of Eve (1883) and Adam (1881); ask them to identify the serpentine forms in use, using sketches to support their analysis. A next step would be to direct students to uncover contemporary figura serpentinata examples in advertising and fashion photographs, for comparison, as well as works by figural artists like Daniel Barkley, Shary Boyle, John Currin, Rineke Dijkstra, Eric Fischl, Kent Monkman, Jenny Saville, and Collier Shore.
Imagine the Possibilities: Explore aspects of the creative process and associated problem solving situations, states-of-mind, and feelings with students. They will be familiar with this from curriculum requirements.

- In small groups, ask students to devise a list of people whom they think are highly creative. (What's their definition of creativity?) Next, ask them to generate a list of creative qualities and attitudes. Have students assess which of these creative qualities and attitudes from the list they have. What challenges creative thinking and actions?

- Spark a debate that questions whether creativity exists in the individual or is nurtured by cultural and social forces. Does competition or collaboration lead to more imaginative and innovative results?

- Like both Michelangelo and Rodin, artists regularly experience moments of frustration, lack of inspiration, stress from competition, and disappointment, even despair if something drastic or unexpected happens. Ask students to write about a time in their own lives where these circumstances or emotions have had an impact. How did they solve these problems? What might others learn from their experiences?

Creative responses

People Who Need People: Figure drawing continues to be a useful and generally valued convention for training visual artists. The degree of careful observation, graphic thinking and decision-making required for figure drawing, sculpting or painting makes the practice useful for students. Both Michelangelo and Rodin recognized the unlimited, expressive possibilities of the figure as subject; their legacies have left the world with many powerful representations of the human body, including Michelangelo’s *David* (1501-04) and Rodin’s *The Kiss* (1886). Students can take turns being the model for the class. Here are a few suggested exercises that can extend and cause students to rethink traditional figure drawing:

- Students draw different parts of the model, on separate sheets of paper. Then, by collaging their images or exchanging drawings with a partner, they create a new body.

- Produce 3D versions of the model using inexpensive plasticene, rather than earthenware clay.

- Draw a series of still views of the model, but superimpose one upon another, possible drawn with different coloured or textured lines. (This imitates Michelangelo’s reworked sketches.)

- Create a series of gestural or contour drawings of the moving model. This animated sequence can cover a single sheet or multiple sheets of paper.

- Have students concentrate on the surrounding (negative) space and background objects, rather than the model. The model’s outline or “ghost-image” will be the only indication of their presence.

- Simulate the *pentimenti* (evidence of changed or overdrawn images) of Michelangelo’s drawings by either (a) redrawing over a failed drawing, or (b) exchanging drawings with a partner and drawing over/into their image. In both cases, remnants of the previous drawings should be visible.
Gift Giving: Have students produce a drawing of their choice or a specified subject, but they must be prepared to give away their finished drawing as a gift, like Michelangelo’s “presentation” drawings. Pre-select the recipient. During the process, ask them to question whether their knowledge of who will receive their drawing has any influence on their creative effort or imagery. Ask them to document the “giving” action in some manner. Can they elicit a response from the recipient? How does this entire transaction effect the creative process?

“Only those human figures are well executed that appear effortless.”
Michelangelo

Living in [Sculpted] Space: Michelangelo was not trained as an architect, but his designs for structures like the dome of Saint Peter’s Basilica, in Rome, and the Laurentian Library, in Florence, are lauded as exemplary Renaissance monuments. Essentially, Michelangelo approached his building designs sculpturally, innovating with 3D forms, expanses of surrounding space, and dynamic decorative elements; the Medici Chapel, with its marble tomb figures of Day, Night, Dusk, and Dawn, in the Church of San Lorenzo, Florence (1519-33) and the Tomb of Pope Julius II, where the statue of Moses is placed, in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, demonstrate the artist’s integrative approach to sculpture and architecture. Rodin’s Gates of Hell also included architectural elements, as it was originally designed for the entrance to a never built decorative arts museum, in Paris.

One way of creatively responding to this idea of combining sculpture and interior architectural space is constructing a site-specific installation. In collaborative teams, students would select a site in the school and design a three dimensional artwork that must always remain unfinished. What questions are attached to things that are incomplete? Is there a way to involve spectators, as artist-participants, to help finish the work?

Falling to Pieces: “Synecdoche” is a literary convention in which part of something is used to represent the whole, i.e. “give them a hand”. Visually, both artists in this exhibition practiced a form of abbreviation by permitting isolated body parts to float freely on paper, in the case of Michelangelo’s drawings (e.g. Studies of a Left Thigh and Knee, a Right Knee, and a Right Foot, c.1550), and sculpting stand-alone appendages or closely-cropped heads, as Rodin did (e.g. Left Hand of Burgher of Calais and Head of Pierre de Wiessant, 1885).

Applying a range of possible media, including collage, drawing experiments, assemblage, photo-montage, mixed media painting, ceramics, even video, students can investigate the expressive potential of a single body part. Does this type of fragmentation objectify a person or can humanity still exist in a piece? How do other body parts convey expression or emotion? Students could also research and visualize ideas about people who have lost parts of themselves, and perhaps reveal how others react to people with physical disabilities.

Partially Done: What does it mean to finish an artwork? When is it truly complete? Challenge students to imagine and produce an artwork that must always remain unfinished. What questions are attached to things that are incomplete? Is there a way to involve spectators, as artist-participants, to help finish the work?

Open Mike: Contemporary artists use appropriation as a way of responding to the work of other artists, either through admiration or satire. Ask students to work with Michelangelo’s drawings or Rodin’s sculptures and some sort of imagery, practice or meme from popular culture to produce a “mash-up.” Could a Rodin hand effectively promote rubber dishwashing gloves? Could animation, a photo series or a documentary-style video be used to re-imagine the work of either artist?
Intriguing Facts About Michelangelo

Michelangelo’s sculptures of *David* and *The Pieta*, the dome design for St. Peter’s basilica, and the Sistine Chapel frescos were all completed before he was 30.

As an adolescent, Michelangelo had his nose broken by a fellow art student, at a Florentine art academy. This incident left his nose permanently crooked; a humiliating flaw that he felt marred his appearance, and may have inspired a Rodin portrait (see below).

Michelangelo was a prolific writer: over 480 personal letters and some 300 poetic works exist.

He was unmarried and childless; inferences about same-sex attractions, his love poems, and the “maleness” of his female figures continue to ignite debates about Michelangelo’s personal life.

Intense self-criticism and doubt tainted his career; consequently, he was perceived as volatile, stubborn, and highly sensitive.

In later years, Michelangelo became more reclusive and introverted; human contacts were infrequent and only occurred through his commissions.

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“A true work of art is but a shadow of divine perfection.”
Michelangelo

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Intriguing Facts About Rodin

As a child, Rodin was very nearsighted and struggled in school; he took up drawing as a way to deal with his visual limitation.

Rodin’s first Salon entry, *Man with the Broken Nose* – the portrait of a boxer or Michelangelo(?) – was partially realized through accident, when it fell to his studio floor, destroying the back of the head; the artist liked the results and left it that way, but the Salon jury rejected it because they considered it unfinished.

*The Thinker*, originally destined for the transom of his larger *Gates of Hell*, is an allegorical figure that also represents both Danté, the Renaissance writer of *The Divine Comedy*, and Rodin himself; Rodin modeled this figure after one of Michelangelo’s from the Sistine Chapel fresco *The Last Judgment*.

Many of Rodin’s sculptures retain his fingerprints, gouges left from slips of the chisel, and incidental drips of bronze, marks included by the artist to draw attention to their imperfect or chance means of production.
Reference


Michelangelo, the Complete Works* www.michelangelo-gallery.org/biography.html


International Centre for Studies in Creativity, Buffalo State University, USA www.buffalostate.edu/creativity/index.xml