

FEATURES Scholarship

This is fantastic, prestigious full page!
Happy Easter - HSTR

HOW THE MUSCARELLE BECAME A BIG HITTER AMONG AMERICAN MUSEUMS

Shows of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Caravaggio have attracted serious interest in the small Virginia museum.

What is the secret of its success? By Ben Luke and Hannah McGivern



When “Leonardo da Vinci and the Idea of Beauty” opens at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston on 15 April, it will justifiably attract enormous public and critical attention. It features 15 drawings by Leonardo and his followers, borrowed from the Biblioteca Reale in Turin, as well as the Codex on the Flight of Birds, around 1505, from the same institution; seven Leonardo drawings from the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence; and eight drawings by Michelangelo from the Casa Buonarroti in the Tuscan capital.

It is not surprising to see such an important show at the Boston museum, one of the world’s great encyclopaedic collections. But the institution behind the show and its first venue, the Muscarelle Museum of Art, part of the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, though renowned and respected in the museum community, is far less widely celebrated. Yet with this and two previous shows of Italian art which travelled to Boston, on Michelangelo and Caravaggio, the Muscarelle has made a name for itself as an organiser of eye-catching, scholarly shows and for managing to secure loans of some of the world’s great art objects.

They include, in this latest show, the *Codex* and Leonardo’s *Head of a Woman: Study for the Angel in the Virgin of the Rocks*, around 1483. It would be logical

“With Italy, in particular, relationships are very important”

to expect that the Muscarelle has masterpieces in its collections, stellar bargaining chips that help it secure loans from institutions eager to borrow them in exchange for their own gems. But while it has 5,000 works in its collection, built by the college since 1732 (the museum itself did not open until 1983), Patrick McMahon, the director of exhibitions and design at the MFA, says their collaboration is based on other qualities. “It’s not who has the material, per se, that matters,” he says. “You do see that sometimes, with collaborations between museums – they’ll do a big exhibition together because they have a good dovetail between their collections that makes that exhibition a logical marriage for them. But in this case, it’s definitely about the relationships between people and the quality of the material.”

The material McMahon refers to is scholarship. The Muscarelle has had distinguished leaders since Glenn Lowry, now director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was its inaugural director. But the ambitious exhibition programme of recent years has been led by the current director Aaron de Groft, a former student at the William & Mary, and his assistant director and chief curator John T. Spike. At the college, De Groft’s professor



and “mentor”, as Spike puts it, was Miles Chappell, the leading US expert on Florentine Baroque paintings and sculptures. De Groft and Chappell initially brought Spike, another world expert in Renaissance and Baroque painting, on to the museum’s board before, three years ago, he took up his current role, which he accepted because, he says, “I found the museum directed by De Groft to be young, ambitious and creative.”

The three shows shared with Boston are a result of that ambition and creativity. Spike’s links with Italy were particularly crucial. He has written numerous scholarly books on Italian art since the 1980s and moved to Florence in 1989 – within a year he was organising an exhibition at the Uffizi and ever since he has been part of the Italian art historical community. His best known books are his 2012 biography *Young Michelangelo: the Path to the Sistine*, and a study and catalogue raisonné of Caravaggio, first published in 2001. “With that background, Aaron reached out to me in Florence with

a vision of doing the important, difference-making shows that we have done,” Spike says.

These close connections with Italian museums are pivotal for the Muscarelle’s Boston collaborators. “With Italy, in particular, relationships are very important,” McMahon says. He adds that “it almost becomes independent of the organisations, it’s all about the different people themselves and the relationships they have. So with the Muscarelle, Aaron approached us a number of years ago about working on the Michelangelo show we shared, and since then, it’s been very easy to continue kicking these ideas around and working on these projects.” The two museums share the exhibitions’ costs.

Giovanni Saccani, the director of the Biblioteca Reale, Turin, confirms that the “scholarly project curated by John Spike was very important” in securing the loans for the show. It is only the third time that the Biblioteca’s Leonardo drawings, most notably the *Codex* and the drawing of the angel, have been lent to a US museum, most recently for

How forensics identified the young Leonardo

One of the most notable aspects of the Muscarelle’s Leonardo show is the fact that the *Codex* on the Flight of Birds is open on the page with a red-chalk portrait of a man beneath Leonardo’s famous backwards-written notes. For 500 years, the identity of the sitter was unknown, but in 2009 a remarkable new suggestion was made—that it was a self-portrait. Digital analysts were able to first separate the image from the text and then use a radical scholarly approach. “Taking a digital image, this outline was studied by the Italian forensic science police,” says Giovanni Saccani of the Biblioteca Reale in Turin. Inverting the process used to find wanted criminals or missing persons by virtually ageing their photo-

graphs, the police generated a more youthful version of the long-established, though in some places still disputed, Leonardo self-portrait, *Portrait of a Man in Red Chalk*, around 1512, that is also in the Biblioteca’s collection. The result was matched to the man in the *Codex*, now presumed to be a self-portrait of the artist aged 50. “Some scholars reserved judgement at the time,” John T. Spike says, “and the portrait page was never presented in subsequent showings, as we have done it.” But there was no chance that the later self-portrait would join the new one in Williamsburg. “Requesting does no harm but everyone knows that generally the self-portrait cannot be exhibited,” Saccani says. B.L. and H.M.

Assistant director John Spike’s Italian connections have been vital to the shows staged at the Muscarelle. Left, the page from the Leonardo Codex, with his writing stripped off to reveal his self-portrait, and the *Portrait of a Man in Red Chalk*, also by Leonardo and thought to be a self-portrait

a show that opened at the Morgan Library in New York in 2013. Among the key arguments in the exhibition is Spike’s contention that some of the eight works attributed by the Biblioteca to followers of Leonardo can be attributed to the master himself. “That is another reason to organise exhibitions. Scholars can study works again and update scholarship,” Saccani says. “John Spike gave this possibility to attribute some drawings at least to the hand of Leonardo, perhaps together with one or other of his pupils.” Spike also supports the identification of a small red-chalk sketch of a man in the *Codex* as a self-portrait of Leonardo (see box).

Among the reasons that allow the Biblioteca to lend its fragile drawings confidently is a wireless conservation system that monitors them 24 hours a day from Italy. “Through a wi-fi system we can see at any moment the levels of temperature and humidity,” Saccani says. “That adds security to exhibitions. The fact of being able to count on this system is an extra motivation to approving loan requests without concerns.”

He adds that the Muscarelle “helped us a great deal, including financially, to put this system in place”, including helping them to create a means by which, even when the wifi was switched off, as it must be on an aeroplane, the crucial data can still be recorded. This level of detail has allowed the Muscarelle to bring together the Biblioteca’s drawings with the Uffizi’s and the Casa Buonarroti’s.

“This is the most important Leonardo exhibition in the United States since the Metropolitan Museum’s in 2003,” Spike argues, “and there are several sheets here from the Uffizi that were not in the New York show due to the difficulty in obtaining the loans.” Saccani agrees that the combination of the three leading institutions’ drawings make it “a one-of-a-kind event”.

The importance of this and the two other Muscarelle-organised shows for the more august MFA is that they “fill a gap” in the collections, McMahon says. “They’re in places where we either have nothing or have no depth. So the opportunity to present works by Michelangelo in Boston is precious for our public. It would be in any city, but we don’t have a single work by Michelangelo that we can show on any ongoing basis.” The same is true of Caravaggio – “not something that we could do from our own collection” – and Leonardo – “there’s nothing of his in the drawers here”.

And, McMahon adds, the Muscarelle-MFA collaborations don’t end here. As Spike says: “There are more, just as important, already in the pipeline.”

• “Leonardo da Vinci and the Idea of Beauty”, until 5 April, Muscarelle Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 15 April-14 June