Michelangelo
Selected Readings

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Michelangelo

Battle of Cascina

I believe that this is the first in the series of the Charlton lectures whose subject is a work of art which no longer exists. Not only has Michelangelo's cartoon for the battle of Cascina not survived. It only existed for about ten years, and it only took the artist a few months to execute. The fact that we can still be interested in something which occupied so small a portion of the artist's long life, which survived for so short a time and which was dismembered as long as four and a half centuries ago is in itself an illustration of the stature of the man, the quatercentenary of whose death we have been commemorating this year.

Surprising as this situation may seem at first sight it is not unique. Among other comparable instances Leonardo's battle cartoon, to which Michelangelo's was intended as the pendant, likewise perished at an early stage but still commands our interest. The fact seems to be that the great and important work of art comes about as a result of a very complex chain of circumstances and chance. The great opportunity only comes to an artist as a result of external circumstances outside his control. To produce the great result the nature of the commission must accord with his own artistic interests at that particular moment. And to produce the greatest result of all it would seem that the art of the particular artist must stand in the right relation to what has gone before. He must stand on the shoulders of his predecessors and then add his own contribution in such a way as to produce the culmination of an existing tradition. Everything would thus seem calculated to prevent the achievement of the supreme work of art, but if the miracle does occur its effect and its fame may outlive its physical existence. When precisely the right amount of extraneous matter of precisely the right kind happens to enter an oyster at precisely the right moment the result may be a pearl. We cannot count the number of failures nature may have had before a success occurs, and if no one is in the neighbourhood at the time the labour is wasted. But if the unlikely happens in the first place, and a fisherman is near in the second, and if, finally, the pearl has the good fortune to be swallowed by Cleopatra its fame is likely enormously to outlast its physical existence.

In the present case there would have occurred one of these infinitely rare conjunctions of chance and opportunity and talent and tradition, together with physical impermanence and enduring fame. In the early years of the 16th century Florentine art was approaching its apex. The long line of sculptors and painters which had included Giotto in the 13th and 14th centuries had gone on to produce an amazing galaxy on the 15th. Donatello, Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Lippo Lippi, Verrocchio, Antonio Pollaiuolo and Botticelli had all flourished within a period of little more than half a century. At the end of it the Medici dynasty which had been a patron to many of them had been temporarily overthrown and a democratic government set up. As a result of this a vast hall had been built on to the back of the Palazzo Vecchio—on the model of the great room in the Doge's Palace at Venice—as a meeting place where all responsible
citizens of Florence should participate in governing it. The most conspicuous feature of the decoration was to consist of two colossal mural paintings of battle. One of these was entrusted to Leonardo, the other to Michelangelo.

There is no need to stress the opportunity. The size of the paintings alone and their situation at the centre of the affairs of the city represented a commission which would only come the way of an artist once in several life times. The type of commission was also a challenge, since there was no tradition of battle pieces of this size. Uccello’s series in Palazzo Medici—Riccardi was much smaller, while the largest space in the hall at Venice was filled, then as now, by a painting not of a battle but of paradise. As to the artists, Leonardo, in his early fifties, had recently returned to his native city after an absence of many years, bringing with him the fame he had gained at Milan. He evidently exercised an irresistible personal glamour so that whatever he did was news. And at this time he had recently drawn a cartoon of the Madonna and Child with S. Anne which had astounded Florence. As to Michelangelo, though he was more than 20 years younger, he had likewise recently returned to Florence covered with glory earned outside his native city. His Pietà in S. Peter’s, Rome had been the first great success of his life. On his return to Florence he was clearly the coming man who could be set up against the great Leonardo. Indeed, the element of rivalry in the battle paintings seems to have existed on all levels from the beginning. Leonardo was probably the first who was commissioned. Certainly he started work first. We do not know exactly when it was decided that Michelangelo should be entrusted with the other painting, but by the time he in his turn started work—at the end of the year 1504—he would already have turned the balance of popular esteem in his favour. For a few months earlier, in the summer of that year, his gigantic marble David had been set up like a Cerberus at the door of the very building—the Palazzo Vecchio—where he and Leonardo were to work in rivalry. As a work of art we may think it would have been on a lower level than the S. Anne cartoon which was all that Leonardo had exhibited in Florence. But the fact that only he, Michelangelo, had dared tackle the abandoned block which had been lying around for many years, combined with the sensational appearance of the result and above all its enormous size, would have amounted to an overwhelming popular victory in prestige.

The two cartoons which resulted from the battle-piece commissions completely fulfilled expectations. Vasari says they at once became the school of the world, and we know that both exercised enormous influence. The verdict on the respective merits of the two was never really given, and in the absence of both could not be given now. Leonardo’s was an animated equestrian battle which affected all later paintings of the kind down to Delacroix and evidently went a long way towards anticipating Baroque art of the next century. Michelangelo’s as we shall see, was in complete contrast. The subsequent fate of the undertaking was tragic. Leonardo started painting from his cartoon, but soon decided that the experimental technique which he had devised was a failure. He thereupon became discouraged and soon afterwards left Florence, intending never to return. It is debatable whether Michelangelo ever started painting at all. He was now the most fiercely in demand of all artists, the Pope, Julius II, in particular, claiming a virtual monopoly of his time. His cartoon was shifted from place to place in Florence and, probably in 1515-1516, was dismembered into a number of different pieces, none of which has survived. Though there is no specific evidence, we may suspect that both Leonardo and Michelangelo felt in this case
that the creative act had fulfilled itself with the completion of the cartoons. The
subsequent routine of painting from them may have seemed an anticlimax and a
bore. We are the more inclined to take this view seeing how much more
satisfying Leonardo’s cartoon of the Virgin and S. Anne (now in the National
Gallery) is than any of his paintings, though the unsatisfactory condition of
nearly all of them is a contributory factor. But cartoons are among the most
fragile of works of art and within a very few years both of those for the battle
did disappear.
Michelangelo’s subject was the battle of Cascina, an engagement which had
been fought against the Pisans in 1364 and won by the Florentines, though not
exactly brilliantly. The choice of enemy was topical, since Florence was again at
war with Pisa. Obviously the choice of subject—or rather of the particular
battle—must have been discussed between the painters and the authorities, but
we may guess that in both cases the artists had the last word. For Leonardo’s
subject—the battle of Anghiari—was an equestrian engagement, obviously
chosen to give him a chance of displaying his unrivalled knowledge of horses.
In Michelangelo’s case the choice was even more ingenious. It has been
suggested that he too may have started by considering an equestrian engagement
as the main theme of his painting. But he probably realised that he could not
rival Leonardo in this field, and in any case his forte was the male nude. This
presented a problem, for although the Greeks and Romans had normally
depicted soldiers nude in battle it is doubtful if this convention would have been
acceptable to a Florentine of the Renaissance in respect of an historical
engagement involving Florentine troops. But it so happened that at this
particular battle it was known that Florentine soldiers had been in danger of
being surprised by the enemy while bathing. In this way Michelangelo could
show off his knowledge of anatomy without departing from history. According
to Vasari he showed the alarm being given, the soldiers scrambling out of the
water and struggling to get into their armour while others were already beginning
to fight. We must emphasise that though Vasari himself never saw the cartoon
intact he was in personal contact with the most devoted student of it, Aristotle
da Sangallo; and his statements are in consequence probably reliable.
In many ways the clearest idea of the quality of Michelangelo’s lost cartoon
comes from a preliminary study for one of the soldiers now in the British Museum
(B.B. 1476, figure 587) (frontispiece). Like many other of his more finished
drawings modern criticism was long reluctant to accept it as an original.1 The
drawing is in a mixed technique. In addition to pen lines use has been made of
wash, and certain areas are heightened with white. In his description of the
cartoon Vasari stresses that Michelangelo included both these techniques in the
big work, wishing to display his command over various media. The drawing well
illustrated Michelangelo’s extreme virtuosity in anatomy as well as in
draughtsmanship. The lower part of the torso is facing us, the trunk is sideways
on and the head turned away. One could hardly imagine a more difficult pose.
This figure can be easily recognised in one of the early engravings—by Agostino
Veneziano.2 Of the other four figures shown in this print, the one on the right
exactly corresponds with Vasari’s description of a figure in the cartoon—an old
man, he says, who had shaded his head with a garland and makes such an effort
to get into his clothes without drying his body that the muscles of his face stood
out and he grimaced with the strain. An even earlier engraving—by Marcontian—
Raimondi—shows three further figures. The backgrounds to these engravings are fanciful, incidentally; Marcantonio’s is taken from a print by Lucas van Leyden.

We may now pass to the famous painting at Holkham (Figure 2). This is probably identical with one which Vasari says was painted at his suggestion in 1542 by Aristotele da Sangallo from a drawing made many years earlier when the cartoon was intact. As you will see, it includes the five figures from the Agostino Veneziano print as well as the three of Marcantonio’s, together with eleven others. For some of the latter we possess Michelangelo’s own drawings. All, or very nearly all, the others can be vouched for in various other copy drawings, and there is no need to spend longer arguing about what is now generally agreed, namely that the Holkham picture, as far as it goes, must be regarded as an accurate copy of Michelangelo.

One of the most revealing documents in the genesis of the Holkham group is a drawing in the Uffizi. (B.1.1397/C, figure 585—reproduced here as figure 3). Just as the British Museum drawing was doubted at one time because it seemed too finished so this one was doubted because it seemed too free. Such are the ways of art historians. In fact I believe both to be authentic, but the Uffizi sketch is so hastily drawn and so faint as to be very difficult to read. With some difficulty, though, it is possible to make out the sense of all the figures. Most of the main features of the Holkham picture are already present. The man towards the right who bends forward from the waist to help the one struggling in the water, the one above him who rushes forward to give the alarm, the twisting nude in the centre foreground whom we saw on the British Museum drawing, the one stretching down to the left of him, and the one scrambling out of the water, farther left still. Finally, the man seen from the back fastening his breeches. All these are recognisable in the Uffizi sketch, not only in the poses—more or
ies—in which they appear in the Holkham painting, but also in the same
relative positions. But the upper extremities are different. The space occupied by
the superimposed figures on the right hand side of the Holkham painting is
blank on the Uffizi sheet. Conversely, the latter has a number of figures on the
left which do not figure in the painting.

I believe the explanation of this to be simple. In the Uffizi sketch the man
fastening his breeches is the central feature of the design. In the Holkham picture
he is to the left of centre. I believe that a desire to shift the axis—which I shall
return to later—was responsible for the main difference between the sketch and
the painting. The shift seemed to have been brought about by cutting figures off
the left of the composition and adding them to the right of it. The recumbent
figure on the extreme left in the Uffizi sketch, for instance, reappears in a new
pose on the extreme right. The two figures seen from the back on the left of the
sketch reappear on the right in the painting. Admittedly their attitudes and
functions are much changed in the process, but the diagonal receding inwards
to the right is the same element of design in both drawing and painting.

If, as I think, the group as shown in the Holkham picture developed in this way
from the Uffizi sketch it can hardly have been intended to be much bigger. The
evolution of the one from the other, described in this way, seems a fairly logical
one, and in fact a few extra figures were added in the painting. But even if the
Holkham group is a complete entity it cannot represent the whole of
Michelangelo's design. Vasari speaks of soldiers actually beginning to fight, and
of this there is no trace. Furthermore the proportions of the group are not the
same as those of the space available. In the Holkham group the length is about one and three quarter times the height. But it can be calculated—this was done by Johannes Wilde—that the spaces available for the battle paintings were proportionately longer than this—about two and a half times their height.

It so happens that the Holkham painting itself contains clues to the lay-out of the whole. At both sides of the group there are figures pointing and gazing outwards. From this alone we can deduce that there would have been further episodes on either side, and therefore that the Bathers group must have been sited sufficiently far from the edge at both sides to permit of this. Also, since the figures in question are shown pointing diagonally—slightly backwards as well as sideways—that the Bathers group would have been nearer the foreground than the flanking scenes. We are even given a clue to what these consisted of. For the pointing man on the right—the soldier with his shield on his right arm—is far more agitated than the corresponding figure on the left. The enemy was therefore in the background scene on the right, and it would have been on that side that the fighting was shown starting. As to what was happening in the left background, an indication comes from a copy drawing in the British Museum which reproduces the figures in the Holkham group (with one omission) and also includes a further scene on the left (B.B. 1624A, figure 598). Though we have no counter check that this reproduces the corresponding portion of Michelangelo’s design both its theme and its position are precisely what we should expect. The subject would be some Florentine cavalry preparing for battle, watched by some foot soldiers. Moreover the appearance of the left section of this scene—the cavalry preparations—is not inconsistent with a sketch by Michelangelo at Oxford (B.B. 1559, figure 594) of part of a scene of this kind. We may note that the horse in this sketch faces towards the right.

As to the appearance of the right hand group—the battle—we have no reliable guide. But as the Florentine cavalry would have been coming from the left the Pisan infantry (they had left their horses behind, according to the account given by Villani) must have shown on the right of it. A further sketch at Oxford shows an isolated horseman galloping from left to right, very possibly intended for this context (B.B. 1557, figure 599).

We have already deduced that the flanking scenes would have been shown farther in the background and would therefore have appeared higher up in the picture space than the Bathers. Indeed, the ground may even have been shown rising slightly as it receded from the river. We can go a little farther in reconstructing the whole if we consider the implications of the action. For of the two flanking groups it seems likely that the battle itself would have been considered more important than the preparations of the Florentine army. Therefore the battle scene may be expected to have taken up more room. And therefore—this seems inescapable—the centre of the Bathers group is unlikely to have coincided with the centre of the whole composition. If the group on the right of the Bathers filled more space than the one on the left of it the Bathers group must have been sited to the left of the centre.

The resulting general composition of three unequal but distinct groups of figures, the central one nearer the foreground than those on either side of it, would have contrasted effectively with Leonardo’s battle piece. In an article which I published ten years ago I gave my reasons for thinking that Leonardo’s design also envisaged three groups, but arranged in the opposite way, with the
central one set farther back than the flanking ones. I also suggested tentatively that the soldiers scrambling out of the water which occur in one of Leonardo’s preparatory studies (Windsor No. 12330) may have given Michelangelo the basic idea for his cartoon. Though Vasari says that Michelangelo disliked Leonardo and behaved churlishly towards him this had not prevented his learning something from the older man on several occasions already, while in a joint undertaking such as this some measure of co-ordination in the design of the two cartoons would have been desirable and indeed essential. In this context we may, very briefly, consider a famous sketch by Michelangelo in the British Museum (B. B. 1521, figure 578). It shows two cavalrymen, on the left, attacking another or perhaps two others (on the right) when they are intercepted by a further one. As we know the Pisani had no horses on this occasion the sketch cannot be connected—as is sometimes supposed—with the battle of Cascina. I have always supported the view that it is probably Michelangelo’s sketch of the left hand group in Leonardo’s modello. As this would have been the section of it nearest his own, his motives in copying it would not have been obscure. He would have had every reason to have a record of Leonardo’s design, or part of it, particularly as Leonardo’s cartoon would not have been before his eyes when he was working on his own.

Probably the best idea of the type of composition which Michelangelo would have had in mind for his battle piece as a whole can be obtained from the next large painting which he executed. This was the Deluge on the Sistine ceiling, the first of the major histories which he painted there and the only one which contains a comparable number of figures to the battle piece, (figure 4). The analogies which can be demonstrated between it and the Battle of Cascina are so cogent that we may be encouraged to regard it as a reliable guide to the system of composition in general. As in all the larger histories on the Sistine ceiling the foreground consists of a diagonal line across the lower left corner, and such a line—in the form of the lie of the river and its bank—is present in the Holkham painting also. Furthermore, the figures in the Deluge are arranged in groups like those in the cartoon (in describing the figures in the cartoon Vasari actually uses the word “grouped”—figure aggregata). In the Deluge the foreground group is on the left, the rear distance one on the right, and the middle and far distance group in the centre. This leads us to consider another of Michelangelo’s principles of pictorial composition. He had a marked dislike of strict symmetry. All the scenes running down the centre of the Sistine ceiling are notably asymmetrical in design, even though they occupy the crown of the vault and are therefore central from an architectural point of view. As we have already deduced on quite different grounds that the Bathers group would have been sited asymmetrically in the whole composition the parallel of the Sistine histories is the more striking. Moreover it happened that in this case some measure of asymmetry was desirable on practical grounds, irrespective of Michelangelo’s preferences as an artist. For the two doors which led into the hall were situated not opposite the points of the two great spaces which were to be filled with the battle paintings but opposite points about a third of their width from the extremities. In the case of Michelangelo’s painting, therefore, the door would have been opposite a point about a third of its total width from the left. We have seen that a shift of the axis from the centre of the Bathers group to the left was the main difference between the Uffizi sketch and the Holkham painting. Sketchy as the Uffizi drawing is we can yet see that the composition as it appears on it would be incompatible with the idea of the figure pointing out of the picture on the left of the group. The sketch
shows a closed composition on this side and the whole design would have fitted well if it were sited at the extreme left of the space. In that case the man fastening his breeches—in any event the most conspicuous figure in the Bathers group—would have been more or less opposite the door. At that stage Michelangelo evidently changed his mind and decided to site the Bathers group as a whole somewhat farther to the right. But he was able to retain the breeches-fastener in the same position relative to the door by changing his position relative to the centre of the Bathers group.

The scale of the figures in the cartoon raises further problems. The pieces of the original which were at Turin in the 17th century are described as containing figures “larger than life.” As another item in the same inventory is described as “slightly larger than life” we may assume that those in Michelangelo’s cartoon were not less than some eight feet high. I think it unlikely that they can have been quite as near the front edge of the picture as they are shown in the Holkham painting—with the addition of the flanking groups this would have produced an effect of uncomfortable proximity. One result of setting the Bathers group rather farther back would have been the virtual necessity of showing more of each of the soldiers as were still in the water than just a pair of hands. I imagine that the head and shoulders of one or more swimmers may have been intended, as in fact is the case in the middle distance in the Deluge. Though the minimum height of about eight feet would have been large for figures not quite in the foreground we have no means of telling whether or not they were larger still. In the Deluge the woman standing on the left holding a child, who is not quite in the foreground, is slightly higher than half the total height of the painting. As the band of figures in the Holkham group is about one and a half times the height of the standing man in it that would mean, if the same ratio prevailed, that the Bathers group would have filled about three quarters of the total height available. As this, on Wilde’s calculations, was not less than some twenty-four feet the absolute height of the group would therefore be in the region of eighteen feet and the individual standing figures some twelve feet. This might well have seemed overpowering even in so vast a room. I would therefore suspect a somewhat lower ratio than in the Deluge between the figures in the Bathers group and the total height of the painting, in other words that the single figures would have been nearer eight feet high than twelve. This in its turn would naturally involve a proportionately greater area of sky—and probably also of foreground—being shown than in the Deluge.

We may therefore imagine the Bathers group, asymmetrical in format and set asymmetrically in the big oblong space, with its centre well to the left of the centre of the whole but probably with its right hand edge slightly to the right of the whole centre. A diagram may make this clearer (figure 5).

One of the most puzzling problems of the whole subject is why the flanking groups do not appear in the Holkham painting. If, as is probable, the panel it is on has not been cut two separate factors could have contributed to this. Vasari, for instance, in describing the cartoon uses the word “abbozzato” (sketched) at one point. Perhaps, like certain parts of Michelangelo’s only surviving cartoon—the Holy Family in the British Museum—the flanking groups were sketchily executed in the original and therefore unsuitable for reproduction in a copy on a much smaller scale. Secondly, it is likely that Michelangelo himself left portions of the cartoon unfinished or unexecuted—he speaks significantly in a letter of 1508 of the cartoon which he had “started” though he had certainly abandoned work.
on the project by this time. In any case it can be assumed that he would have completed a modello for the whole design before starting work on the cartoon at all.

As we cannot go farther in attempting to reconstruct Michelangelo's ideas for the Battle of Cascina in its entirety I should like to return to the Holkham picture and consider it from a different point of view. If we assume that it is an accurate record of the main element in Michelangelo's battle piece we may legitimately, and within certain limits, learn something from it of the original as a work of art.

The scene appears to be set on a bare ledge of rock which bears little resemblance to the banks of the Arno as I know them. The alarm is given by the bearded figure—Manno Donati according to Villani—slightly to the right of the centre, who rushes forward, followed by a figure holding with his right hand a pipe which he is blowing and apparently beating a drum with his left. Immediately behind this figure a head like a zephyr seems also to be blowing a pipe or whistle. The resulting commotion has succeeded in rousing a sleeper who had been reclining at the feet of Manno Donati. He rises reluctantly, removing from his head some drapery, evidently used for protection against the sun. Nearer the foreground another reclining figure—somewhat in the attitude of a Dead Christ in the Entombment—seems still half asleep. A third recumbent figure, on the extreme right, is awake but not yet attempting to get up. Of the three nudes in the left foreground the one on the left of all climbs out of the water unaided. The one to the right of him stretches down to help an unseen comrade, and the third—twisting figure whom we saw first in the finished study in the British Museum—has evidently been asleep on the drapery he is sitting on; he just roused himself and turns round to see what it is all about. The old man on the right is beginning to dress, but some of the figures farther back are in a more advanced state of preparation. The standing figure seen from the back is already in his cuirass and fastening his breeches, while on the extreme right the figure who looks over his left shoulder is almost ready. The finishing touches are being given to his equipment by the naked figure to the left of him. Most advanced of all is the fully armed soldier in the top right hand corner whose shield is on his outstretched left hand and who turns back as though shouting: "come on; this is the way".

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I have described the scene in this detail because it is not at first sight easy to see what is in fact happening. The figures are so tightly packed that we can easily understand a mistake in the Turin inventory in the 17th century. The fragment in question of the cartoon contained both the man second from the left in the foreground, stretching down into the water, and the pointing figure above him.

The latter was described as using the back of the former as a stool to help him get up. In fact, as we can see from the Holkham painting, there is meant to be space between these two. They are not touching. The sense of congestion, and the absence of aerial perspective, is even more marked in the centre of the group. Manno Donati, who is supposed to be rushing forward, could not in fact move another inch. He is completely hemmed in, while the figure in front of him who bends forward with outstretched arms seems at first to be assisting the nude at his feet to rise rather than helping another out of the water, which is what he is really trying to do.

It is precisely this element which is conspicuously lacking in what I should regard as the most distinguished of all the works of art which Michelangelo’s cartoon inspired. This was Raphael’s Massacre of the Innocents, a composition dating from a few years later and known only from Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving and from some preliminary drawings by Raphael. The derivation from the cartoons seems fairly obvious, particularly in respect of the way in which the whole composition in each case pivots on a central figure who is shown running forward. Not only has Michelangelo’s Manno Donati been transformed by Raphael into a woman who has plenty of empty space in which to continue her headlong rush. The position of the other figures in the Massacre is likewise delineated in space with perfect clarity by means of the squares on the pavement. This was not an invention of Marcantonio’s. It was an integral part of Raphael’s design and from an early stage, as we can see from his drawing in the British Museum (1850-4.14.446) where it is already present, even though a number of the figures have not yet assumed their final form.

The denial of aerial perspective, and indeed almost of linear perspective, which we see in Michelangelo’s cartoon in an extreme form is, I believe, one of the most significant features of his style as a painter. So marked is it that I doubt if the Holkham copy falsifies it in this respect. Indeed, we have just seen a striking mistake arise from this factor in respect of part of the original itself.

There would have been good reasons of two distinct kinds for Michelangelo to adopt a method of composing pictures in dense masses. As a sculptor turning his attention to painting he might have been expected to think along some such lines in any case. But it so happened that Leonardo, who was not basically a sculptor but who was the only living artist of a stature to influence Michelangelo at this stage of his career, had been evolving methods of this kind for different reasons. The central section of his own battle piece—the Fight for the Standard—is so tightly packed that there is practically no daylight showing between any of the figures. So densely welded are they, indeed, that we have difficulty in believing that the group, as we see it in a copy in the Uffizi, is made up of no less than six men and four horses. In the engraving by Zacchia a seventh man is added. Leonardo’s extraordinary device of showing the opposing cavalymen with their horses facing in the same direction—thereby avoiding a triangle of empty space under the bellies of horses meeting head on—has permitted so tight a degree of interlocking that the multi-figure group has become a single plastic unit.
In this case the type of interlocking is associated with the principle of rapid movement. The force of the impact which is conveyed seems to make the group rotate, and this later became one of the chief principles of Baroque art. In Michelangelo's painted Holy Family known as the Doni tondo the movement is much less violent but the figures are equally firmly locked. It is in this connection that we may examine the main difficulty, for the artist, of composing in this way. Imagine, for instance, the Joseph in the Doni tondo as he would appear if the Madonna and Child were removed. He would be revealed in a grotesque attitude like a Russian dancer, squatting on his left leg with his right outstretched. The marvellous unity of the group has been achieved at the expense of the single figures, and this is nearly always the case in the tightly-welded group composition. Other instances are Leonardo's painting in the Louvre of the Madonna and Child with S. Anne or Michelangelo's own early Pietà in S. Peter's, Rome. In both cases the harmonious group could only be achieved at the cost of making the seated figures much larger than the reclining ones. If they stood up Leonardo's S. Anne and Michelangelo's Virgin Mary would both dwarf the figures they support. They could not support them otherwise.

This method of excluding space in a figure composition, which we may call the interlocking system, was not the only way in which it could be done. Another was by composing a painting with a continuous hedge of figures as in a relief. It was here that Michelangelo's training as a sculptor was of service, for the only multi-figure composition which he had executed in any medium prior to the Cascina was precisely a sculpted relief—the Battle of the Centaurs. It is hardly surprising that of all works of art, whether by himself or another, it comes nearest to the Bathers group. Both are conceived with the minimum of recession and with the attitudes of the figures cunningly contrived, as in the antique sarcophagus reliefs which inspired them, to permit of superimposing the figures, the recumbent ones in the foreground, the crouching ones in the middle and the standing ones at the back.

Whereas the tendency in the interlocking group had been for the group to dominate the figures of which it was made up, here it seems to me to be the reverse. Despite the infinite care and artistry which has clearly gone to welding together the numerous figures in the Battle of the Centaurs it seems to me that the single figures in it are more memorable than the whole. The standing youth, left centre, the figure to the right of him, dragging the woman, and the bent form of the latter herself—these are the features which remain longest in the mind's eye, and variations on them constantly recur in Michelangelo's later work.

Though this impression may be, in part at least, no more than a personal reaction of my own there are grounds of a more objective kind for assuming something of the sort in the case of the Bathers. A remark of Vasari's is extraordinarily significant in this connection. Though every student in Florence studied Michelangelo's cartoon only one, according to him, copied the whole of it. This was Aristotle da Sangallo. Vasari's assertion is borne out by the only copy we know which was certainly made before the cartoon was dismembered—Mancinelli's engraving of 1510 which shows only three figures out of nineteen. Only one explanation seems to cover this very strange situation. The single figures in the Battle of Cascina were of such perfection that they eclipsed the work of art as a whole.\*
There can be no doubt that the loss of both Leonardo's and Michelangelo's battle cartoons and the failure of both to execute them in painting was one of the most serious losses in the history of European art. Most particularly is this the case, it seems to me, in the loss of the opportunity which would have been provided for a direct confrontation of the two greatest artistic geniuses of the Italian Renaissance. Other great paintings by Michelangelo survive and some by Leonardo. But neither in respect of them nor of the very few other artists in history of comparable stature can we point to another joint undertaking of this importance.

But in the case of Michelangelo's contribution I am inclined to modify the view which is often held, namely that it was his life's masterpiece. Certainly he himself did not take its failure to heart to anything like the extent that he did in the case of the Julian tomb. And Cellini, who specifically states that Michelangelo never did anything so good again, is probably not reliable in this instance. Something marvellous which one has seen in youth and which has then ceased to exist seems more marvellous still when recollected in middle age. I am quite unable to believe, for instance, that the Caccia nudes were more beautiful than the ignudo on the Sistine ceiling. I cannot imagine that anything could be. The evidence suggests that they were less massive, and to that extent nearer the Greek ideal, and here Vasari's famous statement that they were the school of the world seems illuminating in another sense. The Caccia Bathers may have been—indeed, fairly certainly were—the culmination of the Florentine tradition, but only in the narrower sense—the sense in which the painter assumed the sculptor's function of depicting the nude in action and nothing else. But it seems inevitable that such a subject could have given Michelangelo no scope for his powers of infusing pathos—that uniquely marvellous super-charge which, coming on top of his unparalleled gifts in the academic sense exalted the Sistine ceiling and all his later work above the level of almost all other art of any country before or since . . .

It is tempting to continue the eulogy of Michelangelo's art in general, and I have no time left in which to do so. But thanks to his longevity we shall not have to wait long before another official occasion offers. For only eleven years after this, the quincentenary of his death, we shall be due to celebrate the quincentenary of his birth.
Since this lecture was delivered an elaborate reappraisal of the evidence relating to both Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s proposed decorations in the Palazzo Vecchio has been published by Christian Adolf Isemeyer (Die Arbeiten Leonardo und Michelangels für den grossen Rassale in Florence in the Festschrift für Ludwig Heinrich Heydenreich, 1894, pp. 83 ff.). In effect, it consists of an attempt to reverse the decisions of most previous writers on this subject, and in particular those of Johannes Wilde as having proved the most influential. Mr. Isemeyer reverts to the assumption that Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s paintings were intended for opposite walls of the hall and not both for the east wall. He also postulates that each wall was to have been decorated not with one but with three separate paintings, as in the existing arrangement by Vasari. He calculates that Leonardo was allotted more than twice as much paper for his cartoon as Michelangelo, and deduces from this either that Leonardo originally intended to do all six paintings, and that three of them were allotted to Michelangelo as an afterthought, or else that Leonardo was allotted the east wall, which is longer than the west, and Michelangelo the west.

It might be thought that the wording of the Signoria’s statement of May 4th, 1504—"havendo piu mesi fa Leonardo . . . tolto a dipingere uno quadro della sala del consiglio grande" (my italics) ruled out Mr. Isemeyer’s theory without further ado. For this reason he is at pains to claim (p. 94) that the “quadro” in question referred not to the work in the Palazzo Vecchio but to a preliminary technical experiment carried out by Leonardo, according to the Anonimo Magliabechiano, in the Sala del Papa of S. Maria Novella, where he also drew the cartoon. The Anonimo says nothing of the subject depicted in the test painting, or even if the latter depicted anything at all. Mr. Isemeyer’s contentions that it consisted of a large-scale painting of the Battle of the Standard and that it was from this that Rubens executed his drawing are possible, but his justification for them is quite unconvincing. In particular, his insistence on the points of divergence between the Rubens drawing and Zacchia’s engraving to prove that Rubens worked directly from an original by Leonardo is so perverse as to raise grave suspicions of the validity of the author’s methods in general. It is abundantly clear from Rubens’ copies of pictures which have survived that he felt himself at liberty to depart from the original at will.

Mr. Isemeyer’s attempt to relate the test painting to the document of May 4th, 1504 (“Leonardo . . . tolto a dipingere uno quadro della sala del consiglio grande”) can hardly be taken seriously, but is essential to his thesis. Even if he is correct in assuming (p. 99) that the wood allocated to Leonardo on the 8th January, 1504 was for the purpose of the test, and therefore constituted official cognisance of it, the latter was still a means to an end and not an end in itself. The sense of the document of May 4th, 1504 concerns the object of the whole undertaking—the mural for the great hall—and in this connection any experimental painting would have no more significance than any other necessary tools and was no more liable to be mentioned in such a context than they would be.

If, then, we assume that “uno quadro della sala del consiglio grande” means what it says—that Leonardo had undertaken to execute one painting and no more on the wall of the great council hall—we must dismiss Mr. Isemeyer’s thesis and seek another explanation of the phenomenon to which he has rightly called attention—the disparity in the allocation of paper for the two cartoons.

Several factors arise from this situation which Mr. Isemeyer has not seen fit to
consider. In the nature of things, for instance, the quantity of paper involved, being issued in advance of requirements, could not be expected to correspond exactly with whatever quantity may in the event have proved necessary. Furthermore, it was not necessarily even the artist’s estimate of requirements. What it was, was the issuing authority’s interpretation of the artist’s estimate. The first imponderable is therefore: how much wastage did the artist calculate for himself? Secondly: how much were the authorities prepared to give him? It need not be emphasised that an extravagant estimate by the first artist who applied would be liable to react unfavourably on the next artist’s application. In Leonardo’s case, his habitual lordly disregard for expenditure together with his equally habitual love of experiment may well have caused him to allow for an entirely unreal amount of wastage. When, therefore, a few months later, Michelangelo in his turn applied for paper it would not be surprising if his estimate, whatever it may have been, was pruned by a thrifty clerk. A further factor arises from the unprecedented scale of the cartoons. No one alive, either artist or issuing authority, would have had experience of work on this scale, and this again would be liable to affect the two applications differently. Any artist who was the first—not only Leonardo—might reasonably demand plenty of scope experimentally, and the issuing authority might likewise be indulgent. But at the second application it would be different. Even if the second artist had not profited by the experience of the first, officialdom would be likely to have done so. Furthermore, the pasting together of such huge quantities of paper would also require some allowance for wastage, and this again might be allowed for more generously in respect of the first application than of the second.

As regards the specific quantities of paper involved Mr. Isaeiiney calculates (p.115) that with a height of 4.32 metres the total length of Leonardo’s cartoon would be 52 metres. In the case of Michelangelo his figures (p. 119) are 4.32 x 23.5 metres. This would give the respective areas of 224.84 square metres in the case of Leonardo and 101.52 for Michelangelo. Now Wilde calculated the spaces available for painting as 7 x 17.5 each; therefore 122.5 square metres. This is rather more than half the area of paper which Mr. Isaeiiney calculated was issued to Leonardo and about a sixth larger than the paper he estimated for Michelangelo.

These figures, reached by two different scholars from entirely different data and for diametrically opposed ends, seem to the present writer strikingly related. Judging by instances in the Renaissance where both painting and cartoon have survived—such as Raphael’s S. Catherine, Madonna of the Tower or School of Athens—the cartoon, being only for the figured area, was to that extent of smaller overall dimensions than the finished painting. On this analogy Michelangelo would have been allotted approximately the minimum normal amount, without allowance for errors, and Leonardo approximately double. Leonardo could thus have made a complete false start, but more probably was counting on many auxiliary cartoons. The wonder is not that Leonardo should have been allotted so much but that Michelangelo should have been content with so little. It must be emphasised that this interpretation is necessarily hypothetical, but at least it may show that Mr. Isaeiiney’s explanation of the disparity is not the only possibility.

It must be admitted that there are uncertainties in Wilde’s reconstruction of the hall, particularly in his arrangement of the windows on the west wall. According
Vasari, the hall was originally lit merely by windows at the two ends. When this was found insufficient two further windows were cut in the middle of the east wall and four in the west. Even this, Vasari adds, was unsatisfactory. Wilde assured that all six new windows were of the size and shape of the one whose outline is still visible on the outer wall of the north end. This is relatively large, and by assuming that the four on the west wall were evenly spaced (Vasari had not specified whereabouts on it they were) he deduced, as is inevitable, that there would have been no space for a large painting on that wall. Mr. Isenmeyer points out that with such large windows it is difficult to imagine that the lighting would still be inadequate. To this it can be retorted that it was in Vasari’s interests, as the remodeler of the hall, to stress its unsatisfactory aspects. But it may be admitted that though a chance documentary reference of the period (Frey, Prussian Year-Book, 1909, Beihlert p. 117, document 27) shows that the windows on the west wall were at least arched there is insufficient evidence to visualise its appearance in general. Despite this it is possible to turn the argument in such a way as to render Wilde’s solution still overwhelmingly probable. For if we leave the west wall out of consideration it remains incontrovertible, if the two windows on the east wall were, as Vasari says, in the centre, that very large spaces for paintings were available on either side of it. Indeed, the fact that the supplementary windows were pierced in the centre of the east wall, and not at even intervals of thirds, proves that spaces on either side were positively required, while the greater number (four) of supplementary windows on the west wall is a proof that it was the east which had to be best lit. So that if Leonardo had, as we know, contracted to paint one picture the other space must have been for Michelangelo. For all these reasons the text of the foregoing lecture is here printed without alteration.
Illustrations
1. Michelangelo: Study for figure in Bathers group in the Battle of Cascina (British Museum).
5. Reconstruction of composition of Battle of Cascina.

Bibliographical note
Notes
1. For the relevant critical opinions see Wilde’s British Museum catalogue, pp. 14–16.
5. It is clear from Vasari’s description that Michelangelo telescoped Villani’s account of the day’s events. As with other descriptions of battles where many things happen simultaneously it is difficult to estimate what intervals of time were involved. But at least the Florentines did not go, as Michelangelo seems, according to Vasari, to have depicted them, straight from the river into battle. The alarm was a deliberately false one and the fighting would not have started until some time later.
7. J. Wilde had suggested (Burlington Magazine, 1953, p. 73) that the central group was intended for the foreground. Such terms are relative. In any case, it seems to me, the left-hand flanking group in Leonardo’s cartoon, at least, must have been nearer the foreground than the central one.
8. A reconstructed plan of the hall at the time is reproduced by J. Wilde in the Warburg article, plate 19 a. C. A. Starmer (see Postscript) denies (p. 196) that there was a second door at the south end of the west wall. Though this was indeed not executed until 1550 it seems always to have been planned. Its location is not in doubt (see Leni: Palazzo Vecchio, 1928, p. 108).
9. An alternative arrangement would have been that the breeches-fastener was intended as the centre of the whole composition and that at the time of the Uffizi sketch the Bathers group was intended to be set symmetrically in the centre of the available space. The rearrangement of the group would have left the breeches-fastener still in the centre of the wall space though the Bathers group as a whole would in that case have been to the right of the centre. But as the battle was undoubtedly to the right of the Bathers group and as this arrangement would have left less space for it than for the cavalry preparations it seems to me unlikely—even without the evidence of the British Museum copy drawing which shows the cavalry preparations taking up little room. One must therefore assume that Michelangelo preferred his most conspicuous feature (the breeches-fastener) to be opposite the door, rather than in the centre of the whole composition. Such an assumption would accord well with his dislike of pictorial symmetry. In my hypothetical reconstruction of Leonardo’s battle cartoon (Act Bulletin, 1952) the possible influence on Leonardo’s design of the asymmetrical position of the other door was not discussed. But the unmounted figure of the “Captain” whose existence I postulated towards the right of Leonardo’s composition would in fact accord well with this. He would have constituted a conspicuous accent in the correct position.
11. By the kindness of the present Earl of Leicester I was enabled to examine the Holkham picture out of its frame. In the neighbourhood of all four edges are depressions in the panel which are incompletely covered by the priming and paint. It therefore seems likely that it has not been cut and was always its present size.
13. Tre uomini più grandi del naturale, uno che fe schena all’altro, il quale sta par salva poggando col gommo e la mano su la schiena di un altro, che gli fe scabollo.
14. The strange drawing in the Albertina ([Stiö & Fröhlich-Bum no. 138] may represent a half-hearted (and inaccurate) attempt to reconstruct the lay-out of the Bathers group as a whole after it had been dismembered.

(The abbreviation B.B. refers to Berenson’s Drawings of the Florentine Painters: 1903 and 1938.)