

CMRS Faculty Colloquium

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"Michelangelo's Inner Anatomies: On the Proto-Scientific Trials of an Early Modern Poetics of the Body"

Michelangelo has long been praised as an unrivaled master of anatomy. Indeed, his sixteenth-century contemporaries never failed to comment on his devotion to the dissection of dead bodies—a process that apparently allowed the artist to make unprecedentedly naturalistic images of the human



body in his works. Yet, despite Michelangelo's reputation as an anatomist, almost nothing has been written on what Michelangelo actually understood of the body's interior spaces, especially the primary organs of brain, heart, and liver. In this talk, I show the numerous ways in which Michelangelo, without depicting internal organs themselves, nevertheless indicated them and made them meaningful throughout his art. Drawing from discourses on the body in poetic, theological, philosophical, and even scientific texts, Michelangelo's developed a sort of poetics of the inner body that might be considered one of his most important achievements, a sort of language of bodily meanings with a wide range of connotations. However, Michelangelo's poetics of inner anatomy were perhaps temporarily doomed to oblivion: at the very time as he developed this new body language in art, the first stirrings of the scientific revolution would seem to undercut his more metaphor-driven approach to anatomy. Torn between two world systems, Michelangelo's anatomical work reveals both the stakes and potentials of the new science in its relation to art.

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