Form and Function in Italian Drawings:

OBSERVATIONS ON SEVERAL NEW ACQUISITIONS

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Annibale Carracci’s drawing of a youth with angel wings indicated above his shoulders (Frontispiece) is to our modern eyes an independent work of art. The sureness of the black chalk line that delineates the contour of the youthful head and torso and suggests the fall of the drapery, the white chalk highlights that model flesh and drapery in the round have an authority that we find only in the work of a great and eminently competent master. However it is most unlikely that Annibale Carracci himself imagined that this drawing would be exhibited as a work of art in itself. In fact, the drawing is a study for a single figure in a monumental altarpiece representing St. Gregory Praying for the Souls in Purgatory (Figure 2). As he elaborated the over-all composition and the poses of individual figures for this large painting Annibale must have made a great many drawings; these sketches were steps in a complex process.

Draughtsmanship, il disegno as Italian art historians from Vasari onward have insisted, was the foundation of Italian painting. Whatever the painted work might be—a vast fresco, a great altarpiece, a small predella panel, a portable devotional picture—it was based on drawings. A painter made drawings of the whole composition, studies of groups of figures, single figures, drapery, heads, hands, and feet. The authority, the splendid assurance, of most of the great Italian paintings of the Renaissance and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has its roots, practical and aesthetic, in the carefully drawn preparation for the final work.

The independent artistic merit of these drawings has been recognized at least since the time of Vasari, who was one of the first collectors of them, and from the beginning of the seventeenth century up to the present, Italian drawings have

The Italian drawings discussed in this article will figure in an exhibition of recently acquired European drawings, which will open on March 13 in the first room of the Special Exhibition Galleries. This presentation will include a selection of some 55 drawings, purchased by the Metropolitan Museum in the course of the past year.

Contents

Form and Function in Italian Drawings
by Jacob Bean

A “Credo” Tapestry
by William H. Forsyth

225
240
been systematically sought after as testimony of the essential style of an artist. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries drawings were jealously guarded by collectors in portfolios; the notion that a drawing could be framed and exhibited as a small picture seems to have become widespread only by about the middle of the eighteenth century, and then in France rather than in Italy. By the early years of the nineteenth century, at the time of the opening of the first public museums, drawings were often shown in frames. This custom has continued up to the present, often to the detriment of the drawings, which are bound to suffer if overexposed to light.

We have grown accustomed to seeing drawings framed and often elaborately matted in a way that suggests that they are, by the artist's intention, complete in themselves. To be sure, there has always existed a category of “finished” drawings. Michelangelo's elaborate stippled allegorical compositions drawn for presentation to his friend Tommaso de' Cavalieri are well-known early examples of drawings produced as independent works of art. Such drawings are nonetheless the exception in Italian draughtsmanship.

The magnificence and the originality of Italian painting gives to the surviving preparatory drawings of its greatest masters an unquestionable historical and documentary interest. Through the study of these drawings we can discern the working methods and the intentions of a painter, surprise the secrets of genius. Indeed, one of the fascinating jobs of the drawing specialist is the detective work that leads to the discovery of the
connections between drawings and paintings. The preparatory drawing may establish the identity of the artist who painted the finished work, just as the signed and dated painting may identify the draughtsman of the preparatory study. A knowledge of these relationships is essential to our understanding of Italian drawings—not merely because they can help us in attributing drawings to particular artists, but first and foremost because they enable us to establish with some certainty why the artist drew a given drawing as he did, precisely or loosely, why he chose particular drawing materials, why certain details are insisted on, why others are hardly indicated. Function dictates form in Italian drawings. A careful study of an individual figure that the artist intends to place in an already defined composition will differ stylistically and technically from a sketch in which he is searching for alternative schemes for the whole composition. Studies for details are likely to be more detailed than composition drawings, but a finished cartoon ready for transfer to the surface to be painted will have an entirely different appearance from the quick compositional sketches in which the artist jots down ideas for a work not yet begun.

An examination of a number of Italian drawings purchased during the last year by the Museum goes far to emphasize this relation of form to function. Several of them are preparatory studies for known paintings or frescoes, others suggest the artist's final intentions by the nature of their graphic style and technique.

The altarpiece representing St. Gregory Praying for the Souls in Purgatory was commissioned from Annibale Carracci by Cardinal Antonio Maria Salviati to ornament a chapel in the church of San Gregorio Magno in Rome. The painting was probably begun before the Cardinal's death in April 1602, and the chapel was consecrated in October 1603. From Rome the painting found its way into the Ellesmere Collection in Bridgewater House, London, where unfortunately it was burned during World War II. The St. Gregory altarpiece was a majestic work of Annibale's mature Roman style, and indeed our drawing is stylistically very close to the black chalk figure studies for the frescoed decoration of the vault of the Galleria Farnese, Annibale's major Roman enterprise, begun in 1597 and finished about 1604.

Unfortunately, only three studies for the St. Gregory altarpiece seem to have survived: an elaborate composition study now in the collection of the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth; a freer composition study in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, closer to the finished painting than the Chatsworth drawing; and the Museum's beautiful study for an attendant angel, acquired last year from a private collector in London who was the first to establish the connection between the drawing and the altarpiece.

The youth in our drawing is easily recognizable in the angel who stands in the right foreground of the picture and points at St. Gregory.

3, 4. Francesco Mazzola, called Parmigianino (1503-1540). Nine Studies for the Figure of Moses. Verso: Nine Studies for
the Figure of Eve, over an Architectural Sketch. Pen, brown ink, brown wash. 8\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 6\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Pfiffier Fund, 62.135.
5. Federico Zuccaro (about 1542-1609). The Vision of St. Eustace. Brush, water color, and gouache over traces of black chalk, faintly squared off in black chalk. 13 ¾ x 7 13/16 inches. Rogers Fund, 62.76
Both in the drawing and in the painting the figure of the angel perfectly exemplifies the classicizing manner of the mature Annibale. The artist’s style is firmly based on the close observation of nature (our drawing is a study after a young model in the studio), but nature is idealized in a search for noble poses and physical types that testifies to the inspiration of Hellenistic and Roman sculpture. Indeed the solidity of the modeling in the angel’s head and arms has impressive sculptural power. In the course of drawing his youthful model, Annibale has tried a number of alternative positions for the angel’s right arm and hand. Such changes, or pentimenti as an Italian artist would call them, are frequently visible in preparatory drawings, and tell us much of an artist’s struggle to find the perfect gesture, stance, or composition. Our drawing is very close to Annibale’s final solution: the last position of the arm in the drawing, superimposed over at least two alternative poses, corresponds quite closely to that detail in the painting. Annibale’s drawing is an eminently plastic study of an individual figure, and his choice of black and white chalk as his medium on blue paper was surely dictated by the purpose of the study.

The care with which the artist prepared this important commission is further exemplified by the sketch on the reverse (or verso, as it is called in the technical language of book and drawing collectors) of the drawing of the angel. Here (Figure 1) Annibale has drawn the tasseled cushion on which St. Gregory kneels, and has not forgotten to indicate in the curves of its outline the impressions made on the cushion by the saint’s knees.

Another drawing (Cover) by Annibale Carracci, a very free red chalk sketch of two winged putti lifting up a third who holds aloft a palm branch, is so different from the study of an angel that the two drawings hardly seem to be by the same master. However, the red chalk sketch is an early study for part of the decoration of the Galleria in the Palazzo Farnese in Rome and dates from not more than a few years earlier than the drawing for the St. Gregory altarpiece. The difference in style between the two sheets is to be accounted for by the difference in their purposes. The three putti are hastily sketched in by the artist, who is seeking a rhythmic relationship between three figures in the triangular space indicated by vertical lines, rather than the definitive modeling of individual figures.

The frescoed decoration of the Galleria Farnese, one of the greatest triumphs of Italian pictorial and decorative genius, was conceived by Annibale as a complex but completely logical interweaving of full-scale independent painted compositions in simulated frames (quadri riportati) and illusionistic architectural painting (quadatura). At the four corners of the cove vault of the long gallery the painted architecture opens to reveal triangular glimpses of painted sky, against which are silhouetted pairs of putti standing on balustrades. These putti are combined to represent contrasts between spiritual and sensuous loves; the theme of the decoration of the gallery is the Loves of the Gods. In one of the corners Cupid and Anteros are represented struggling for the palm branch. Our drawing, as J. Byam Shaw was first to recognize, represents an early stage of Annibale’s planning for this corner, a stage at which the artist thought of representing the victorious Anteros holding the disputed palm branch and carried by two putti. In this drawing we see Annibale’s style at its most abbreviated, and this very abbreviation can only reinforce our admiration for the magnificent assurance of the artist. How much he is able to suggest with so little!

The preparation for so elaborate a decoration as that of the Galleria Farnese involved an enormous number of preparatory drawings: rough sketches, figure studies, composition studies, full-scale cartoons. Unfortunately only a small part of the drawings that still existed in the seventeenth century (in 1641 the Roman collector Angeloni possessed six hundred drawings by Annibale for the Galleria) have survived today, and most of the remaining drawings are now in the Louvre or at Windsor Castle. The Metropolitan’s red chalk study for the Victorious Anteros is to my knowledge the only Annibale drawing in America related to the Galleria.

We step backward nearly a hundred years in the history of Italian draughtsmanship when we turn to a two-sided sheet by Parmigianino. This bears on one side nine studies for a figure of Moses, seated in a niche and holding the tablets of the law (Figure 3). The verso has the same
number of studies for a figure of Eve, seated in a similar niche and holding the fateful apple (Figure 4). Parmigianino was one of the most influential painters and graphic artists of the sixteenth century in Italy (and all over Europe), and this sheet has long been celebrated, as its provenance from the end of the seventeenth century to the present goes a long way to suggest. It belonged in turn to the Earl of Arundel, Antonio Maria Zanetti, Baron Vivant-Denon, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Richard Ford, and Sir Bruce Ingram before coming to New York.

All the nervous elegance and almost excessive sophistication of Parmigianino’s art is captured here, where the artist has disposed his mannered serpentine figures, subtly adapted to their enclosing niches, so artfully on the page. This brilliant drawing is in a way sufficient unto itself, but it is in fact a document of Parmigianino’s conscientious preparation of one of his major commissions, the decoration of the eastern apse and vaulting of the church of Santa Maria della Steccata in Parma. Other preparatory studies for individual figures and for the whole scheme exist in the British Museum, the Louvre, Chatsworth, and elsewhere, and they reveal how elaborate were Parmigianino’s preparations for the scheme, and how many alternative solutions came to his mind. Unfortunately the artist was not as conscientious in his execution as in his preparation. He received the commission in 1531 with the understanding that the frescoes were to be completed within eighteen months. In 1535 the work was still unfinished, indeed hardly begun, and in 1539 Parmigianino was arrested on the order of his exasperated patrons. He escaped from Parma and died in exile the following year.

The figures of Moses and Eve in our drawing are related to the very small part of the decoration that was completed by Parmigianino himself. These figures appear painted in monochrome on the ribs of the vault of the eastern chapel of the church. It is interesting to observe that none of the nine studies of either figure was Parmigianino’s final choice in every detail for the twists of body or the position of arms. The Moses in the upper right-hand corner of the sheet is perhaps closest to the painted figure; the study of Eve in the upper left of the verso is closest to the figure as it appears in the fresco, holding the apple up provocatively in her upraised right hand.

A water-color and gouache drawing (Figure 5) by Federico Zuccaro representing St. Eustace, who kneels before the dazzling apparition of the crucified Christ between the horns of a stag he has been hunting, is an excellent example of a complete and definitive composition study. The care with which the artist has indicated the whole composition with its landscape setting suggests that we are nearer a finished work than we have been with the previously considered figure studies by Annibale and Parmigianino. In fact, Federico’s drawing is a colored study for a fresco executed on the façade of a small palace on the Piazza Sant’Eustachio in Rome about 1560, when Federico was eighteen years old.

Vasari recounts that this was Federico’s first important commission, obtained for him by his elder and already very successful brother, Taddeo. The work in progress, presumably visible to all who passed through the square, caused so much favorable comment that Taddeo grew jealous and reworked part of the fresco, in order that the best of the execution would be said to be his. Federico not surprisingly flew into a rage and destroyed his brother’s additions. Peace between the brothers was re-established by the intervention of friends, and the finished fresco was hailed as a triumph for the young Federico.

Unlike the Roman exterior wall frescoes of the earlier sixteenth century, which as a rule were monochrome, Federico’s fresco, still visible if completely and catastrophically repainted, was executed in a variety of colors. The red-brown, red, yellow, and green earth colors suggested in our water-color drawing are admirably adapted to fresco painting; the coloristic effect of the finished fresco must have been not unlike that of the drawing. Federico’s choice of technique in our composition study must also have been dictated by the nature of the work for which it is a preparation. He has used the point of the brush rather than pen or chalk to indicate both contour and inner modeling; already he is thinking of the broad, rather coarse brushwork necessary in an exterior painting executed in fresco and intended to be seen from below and from a distance.

With Sebastiano del Piombo’s red chalk study of a seated sibyl (Figure 6), holding a book and
6. Sebastiano del Piombo (1485-1547). Seated Sibyl and Attendant Figure. Red chalk. 9 3/8 x 10 7/8 inches. Pfeiffer Fund, 62.120.7
listening to the whispered counsel of a ghostly genius who appears behind her, we return to figure drawings. This powerful study, first identified as the work of Sebastiano del Piombo by Philip Pouncey of the British Museum, cannot be connected with any extant painted work by the artist. However, it is not difficult to imagine this massive, hieratic figure watching over some sacred scene represented in a great fresco or panel painting. The heavy drapery, treated in broad sculptural folds, the powerful, noble profile of the sibyl, the curious foreshortening of her right shoulder, and the deliberate exaggeration of the size of her hands are all eminently typical of Sebastiano’s mature style. The figure is certainly inspired by the sibyls in the Sistine Chapel, and the monumental sculptural style is also drawn directly from Michelangelo. Sebastiano’s own Venetian pictorial tendencies are apparent in one of the most beautiful passages in the drawing, where the heavily accentuated profile of the sibyl is silhouetted against the shimmering suggestion of the head of the genius.

There is a superficial resemblance between Sebastiano’s sibyl and the Veronese artist Paolo Farinato’s drawing of a seated winged female figure holding a book and a crown (Figure 7): both drawings seem inspired by sculpture. But if with his powerful line Sebastiano suggests a massive form conceived in the round, Farinato is concerned with the pictorial play of light on the surface of a decorative bas-relief. The drawing has not yet been connected with a work by this prolific painter, but it no doubt was a project for the decoration of a spandrel, the triangular space formed by the outer curve of an arch and its enclosing moldings. The easy curve of the body of Farinato’s allegorical female figure is perfectly adapted to filling such a space. The drawing is executed in brush and brown wash over a rough sketch in black chalk. Here the choice of technique not only suggests a probable study for a painting in fresco, as it did in the case of Federico Zuccaro’s St. Eustace composition drawing, but reflects as well a North Italian partiality for the use of the brush in drawings. Tuscan and other central Italian draughtsmen used pen or chalk in their search for ideal contour and modeling, but painters in Venice and on the Venetian mainland found that their pictorial intention could often be more easily and immediately realized with a brush. On this sheet, which bears a recipe for pills against the plague in Farinato’s own handwriting, the artist has modeled his figure not by insisting on contour but by contrasting broad areas of transparent brown wash with the blank blue-gray paper. The style is not linear, but eminently pictorial.

The persistence of this partiality for pictorial draughtsmanship in northern Italy, and particularly in Venice, is apparent in a sheet of studies (Figure 8) by Sebastiano Ricci. The artist has modeled his figures by means of the contrasts between transparent wash and blank paper; the nervous pen underdrawing is hardly more than the skeleton of the drawing. At once conservative and progressive, Ricci is a Janus-like figure in Venetian painting. He looks back to Paolo Veronese for inspiration (and indeed this sheet recalls Veronese’s own sketches), and looks forward to Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, on whom he had a very considerable influence. The figures on this sheet by Ricci are grouped with so much grace and art that we might think he is preparing a specific religious or historical composition. Actually he seems to have been engaged in a very superior form of artistic doodling. Other sheets by Ricci in the Louvre and the British Museum, perhaps from the same sketchbook as our drawing, have similar elegant groups of figures jotted in the same fashion on the page, and none is related to a known composition. In drawing such sketches Ricci kept himself in practice, and, when called upon to compose one of his many vast pictures, his memory could supply him with a whole repertory of graceful poses and groups.

The last drawing reproduced here is Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione’s oil sketch on paper of a youth playing a pipe for a satyr (Figure 9). It is in a sense the exception which proves the rule that Italian drawings are preparatory studies for more finished works of art. Castiglione’s sheet is much larger than any drawing we have so far considered, and the extraordinary brio of its

7. Paolo Farinato (1522-1606). Seated Allegorical Figure with Wings, Holding Book and Crown. Brush, brown wash over black chalk on blue-gray paper. 18¾ x 13¾ inches. Rogers Fund, 62.119.9
brushwork in brown, red-brown, red, green, and blue oil paint is legible at a considerable distance. Framed, it has the appearance of being a small easel picture. The artist's technique is highly original; he seems to have worked with a brush dipped first in linseed oil, then in coarsely ground pigment without any binding medium. If he was attempting to imitate on paper the effect of a Flemish oil sketch on wood, the result he achieved is quite different. The pigment on the paper has a granular quality reminiscent of certain red chalks, but possesses a coloristic intensity and variety impossible to attain with natural chalk or even pastel. In any case, he created for himself a technique perfectly adapted to his bravura manner. Castiglione executed many of these large-scale drawings in brush and oil paint on paper. The largest and finest group of them is in the Royal Collection at Windsor; but the Metropolitan’s newly acquired example is of a quality and completeness comparable to the best of the Windsor group. None of these large drawings appears to be a preparatory study for a painting, though certain subjects occur in both the drawings and Castiglione’s full-scale paintings. The oil sketches on paper are works of art complete unto themselves. Here draughtsmanship attempts with signal success to achieve the effect and attain the dimensions of easel painting. Since, as we remarked earlier, it was hardly until the second half of the eighteenth century in France that “finished” drawings were more than occasionally made to be framed and exhibited, we are not surprised to discover that Castiglione was much admired and imitated in eighteenth-century France. Le Benedette, as the French called him, was imitated by Boucher and had a decisive influence on Fragonard. Indeed, the brilliance of Fragonard’s technique, even the spirit of his work, is adumbrated in Castiglione’s oil sketches.

8. Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734). Figure Studies. Pen, brown ink, blue-gray wash over red chalk. 11 ½ x 7 ¼ inches. Pfeiffer Fund, 62.120.6
