

Pietro da Cortona's Modello for The Idolatry of Solomon

I have chosen to discuss Pietro da Cortona's modello for the Idolatry of Solomon simply because it was the most important of the drawings acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art in the past year. I should point out that I was somewhat torn between this and other alternatives. For example this 1965 abstraction by Adolf Gottlieb represents our interest in modern and contemporary drawings--a new turn for Cleveland which has neglected this area until recent years. Or this *Noli me tangere*, executed in a rather exotic technique: red chalk, brown wash, and white heightening on velum. Attributed to the Roman artist Giuseppe Passeri when it was in the collection of Sir Robert Witt, it was purchased as an anonymous drawing for a modest price. While it shows some of Passeri's typical practices, other characteristics are difficult to reconcile with this artist. An interesting problem in attribution, but its quality easily justified its acquisition. Cleveland already possesses an excellent impression of Camillo Procaccini's *Transfiguration*. This drawing is one of the artist's studies for it. All of these drawings have radically different, but equally compelling reasons for their acquisition. The Idolatry of Solomon is the most straightforward case of all-- a finished sheet of high quality clearly connected with an important project by a major artist who is not represented in the collection. In fact, the Italian Baroque as a whole is poorly represented in Cleveland--which makes this the only acquisition of 1987 that was sought out to fill a previously determined need. The only other really important Roman Baroque drawing in the Cleveland collection is Carlo Maratta's *Apotheosis of S. Filippo Neri*, so that this important early sheet by Pietro da Cortona immediately raises the stature of our collection in this field.

Before I discuss the drawing in more detail I'd like to give you a brief idea of the Cleveland drawings collection. The CMA presently has about 1800 drawings. Slightly less than half of these are by American artists, both major figure like Winslow Homer and Robert Burchfield and by local artists little known outside Cleveland. The rest of the collection consists of the work of major European painters and sculptors. We have few architectural drawings--a lack I'd very much like to correct. At Cleveland the collection has not been developed so much for art-historical comprehensiveness as for quality. I hope the short duration of this talk will excuse me from defining the term here. As a whole the Cleveland drawings have much of the character of a private collection of a very high order. While there is a broad historical scope there are numerous gaps. and while there is a tendency to avoid concentrations in a particular artist, there are telling instances of depth, for example the four Rembrandts acquired during the sixties and seventies. on the whole there are few "study drawings, tattered and faded "problem" sheets that fascinate the drawings specialist but are often incomprehensible to the public at large. Finished drawings are more plentiful than sketches. The reason for this bias towards attractiveness and carrying power go back to the purposes of the founders of the museum. They were not collectors or connoisseurs, but philanthropists, who wished to enrich the urban environment by providing not only educational resources for the public, but objects of the highest beauty, displayed in the hopes of eliciting a direct esthetic response from the visitors.

The Idolatry of Solomon, a drawing executed with a sophisticated combination of brown tinted paper, brown ink, washes and white gouache, is the finished presentation modello for Pietro Berettini da Cortona's fresco in the Palazzo Mattei di Giove in Rome. The construction and decoration of this palace are exceptionally well documented. Further, the technique and style

of the drawing accord perfectly with other early drawings by Pietro, notably the two drawings for the other primary narrative scene in the Palazzo Mattei Gallery and the study in the Uffizi for his oil on copper painting, *The Death of Semeramis* and the study at Rennes for *S. Bibiana Refusing to Worship Idols*.

Many of the questions about the young Pietro da Cortona's work in the Gallery of the Palazzo Mattei di Giove have been answered/ Although a vague tradition had affirmed that he had painted there, Jacob Hess first proved it in 1954 by drawing attention to a passage in a fragmentary first draft of a life of Pietro da Cortona by Mancini preserved in a manuscript in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice (Ms. it. 5571). There, before his mention of Pietro's work in *S. Bibiana* he states: "...et nel Palazzo del Sig.r. Asdrubal Mattei ha operato a fresco in una volta della galleria alchune historie molto genialmente." Hess put this together with a passage in Giovanni Baglione's manuscript of his *Vite* not published in the edition, which stated that the Gallery Pietro Paolo Bonzi da Cortona, an ornamental painter also known as *Il Gobbo dei frutti* or *il Gobbo dei Carracci*, with the assistance of another painter for the figures. From this one can infer that Gobbo was commissioned for the overall design of the vault and then subcontracted the figural parts to his young compaesano. In the vault this is confirmed by four of the narrative scenes, which agree in style with Pietro's *S. Bibiana* frescoes and other early works. The remaining two are much weaker and are clearly the work of another hand.

In 1968 Gerda Panofsky-Soergel published Mattei family documents that confirmed and clarified the attribution. Asdrubale Mattei gave on 16 December 1623 to "Pietro bertini da Cortona pittore che ha fatti i quadri di mezzo," that is the two oblong narrative scenes in the center of the vault, *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* and *The Idolatry of Solomon*. The frescoes

were finished on 4 December 1623. Another document confirms that Bonzi was given the commission for the project on 3 May 1622. Here the Marquess refers directly to the two "quadri di mezzo" and specifies that they be done either by Domenichino or by Guercino. The work presumably went to the young painter by default. In any case we can date the Cleveland drawing to some time in the latter half of 1622, allowing some time for the unsuccessful negotiations with the more established Emilians.

Before I focus on the frescoes in the Gallery and on the preparatory drawings for it, I'd like to place this crucial event in the career of Pietro da Cortona in the Context of Asdrubale Mattei's (1556-1638) prolific activities as a patron, above all in that of the construction and interior decoration of the Palazzo Mattei di Giove, that continued over a twenty-six year period, from 1598 to 1626, until the Gallery was completed. He continued for another twelve years until his death at the age of eighty-two. The Gallery, built in 1626, was the culmination of the decoration of the interior of the palace.

The Mattei were an old family of Roman origin. One branch settled in what became a family compound partly on the site of the Circus Flaminius, bordered by the Via delle Botteghe Oscure, the Via dei Funari and the Via Caetani. The Palazzo dei Mattei di Giove forms one part of this Isola dei Mattei. Its construction under Carlo Maderno began three years after Asdrubale's marriage (his second) in January 1595 to Costanza Gonzaga daughter of Count Alfonso Gonzaga of Novellara. Their combined coat of arms, the Mattei checkerboard and the Maltese cross of the Gonzaga appear throughout the palace. In 1600 Asdrubale's fortunes enjoyed a great boost through a grant of primogeniture by his brother, Cardinal Girolamo Mattei. The third brother, Ciriaco, also received the grant. Asdrubale had already acquired the castle of Giove in

southern Umbria in 1597, after which he added the eagle, the bird of Jove, to his family crest. After the granting of primogeniture this assumed additional meaning from the tradition that the eagle only brings up one of its young. From 1598, the construction of the Palace continued in three phases, extending from the corner of the Via Caetani: 1598-1601, 1604-1613, and the last, comprising the Gallery, from 1613-1616.

The decoration of the palace with frescoes began in 1600-1601 with the work of Cristofano Roncalli, known as Il Pomerancio (1552-1626). In the next phase of decoration, which consisted of stories of Jacob in the new rooms, surrounded by ornamental "stucchi finti," executed by young Bolognese artists from the workshop of Annibale Carracci, Francesco Albani (1578-1660) and Domenichino. Panofsky-Soergel, in her discussion of these frescoes, believes that Albani and Domenichino may have been recommended by Roncalli, who would have been acting throughout as Asdrubale's artistic advisor. After a dispute with Albani about fees, Mattei gave the rest of the decorations in this phase to artists of the circle of Roncalli, like Gaspare Celio (1571-1640), who painted the only scenes in the palace from classical mythology, with Jove smiting the giants with his thunderbolts. In the third phase the young Emilian artists took over from the late mannerists of Pomerancio's school. In 1615 Giuseppe Lanfranco (1583-1647) was commissioned to paint scenes from the life of Joseph. Sisto Badalocchio and Pietro Francesco Alberti also participated. Nappi returned to paint a small chapel, "La Capella del Presepio," with scenes including the childhood of Christ.

The final phase was the Gallery, commissioned from Bonzi in 1622. As executed, the decoration consists of two rectangular scenes fitted into the center of the vault as illusionistic canvases, quadri riportati, each flanked by smaller hexagonal scenes. The end of the Gallery as

well as the space between the narrative units are occupied by garlands and "stucchi finti."

Further narrative scenes, as well as the Mattei di Giove arms are depicted in medallions. Eight lunettes show landscapes of Mattei fiefdoms.

Following the pattern set by the earlier secular rooms in the palace the Gallery contains scenes from the life of an Old Testament figure. in this case, Solomon. The contract says that Asdrubale gave Bonzi a specific written account of the scenes to be painted. The elements of the design are clearly described, the medallions, the lunettes, and above all the two narrative scenes in the vault, "quelle due Historie che sono e vengono nel mezzo." In the finished vault Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are flanked by Solomon's Anointment as King and Solomon's Marriage to Pharaoh's Daughter. The Idolatry of Solomon is flanked by the Death of Joab and Solomon Thanks God for the Gift of Wisdom. The central medallion contains the arms of the Mattei di Giove and the ends the Judgment of Solomon and the Dedication of the Temple at Jerusalem. In this unusually comprehensively cycle dedicated to Solomon the fundamental contrast of the two central scenes, that show Solomon at the height of his wisdom and the depth of his folly, are developed further by the subsidiary narrative scenes. This reflects the humanistic, secularizing attitude towards the Old Testament of a patron who appears to have avoided Classical mythology with only one notable exception in his decoration of the rooms of his palace. Asdrubale's collection of Classical antiquities was reserved for the courtyard of the palace, which, after the marriage of his sister-in-law Eleonora Gonzaga, Duchess of Mantua, to the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II in 1622, he decorated with busts of Roman Emperors. This marriage, furthermore, is likely to have played a role in Asdrubale's choice of a regal subject for the Gallery. In fact it is probable that the Gallery, of which the fabric had been completed in 1616,

was decorated specifically for celebrations in honor of this illustrious marriage. I think this more plausible than Hess' view that the Solomon cycle refers to Asdrubale's own marriage to Costanza Gonzaga in 1595.

The originality of the subject-matter effected a direct influence on the conception and execution of the two main narrative panels, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba was the only major scene in the Gallery that was widely diffused in Italian art. It had been a common subject on marriage cassoni since the Middle Ages. The Idolatry of Solomon, on the other hand, was virtually unknown. In northern Europe the scene appeared in the ornament of textiles and metalwork, eventually, by the fifteenth century, as part of a cycle of moralizing scenes from the Old Testament depicting the pernicious power of women over men. Here the Idolatry of Solomon was included as an *exemplum stultitiae* together with Adam and Eve, Lot and his Daughters, and others. Like so many subjects from the decorative arts, the series was readily adopted by printmakers. Lucas van Leyden executed no fewer than three versions. In the Reformation the Idolatry acquired a new significance in Protestant circles, as an anti-papal motif--one clearly inappropriate in the present context.

The young Pietro, then, had a wealth of precedent in the iconography of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba but far less for the Idolatry. This had a direct consequence in the conception, and ultimately the success of his rendering of the two scenes. When one compares the two, a certain stiffness and monotony is apparent in Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, while the Idolatry has more variety in the figures and in their disposition. Pietro seems to have enjoyed more ease and confidence in his ability to construct the scene around the poignant psychological details of Solomon's flawed behavior. In the Idolatry Pietro has raised the splendor of the Queen of Sheba

to true dramatic narrative.

Two drawings survive for Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. One sheet, which is less finished, is in the Teylers Museum in Haarlem, the other is worked out almost to the extent of the Cleveland drawing and like it was clearly intended as a presentation modello. It is close to the Cleveland drawing in technique, with passages of rich elaboration of light and shade with brown wash and white gouache of varying opacity. This is carried out unevenly in the Morgan drawing, however, and there are some traces of uncertainty and awkwardness. We must remember that Pietro was at the beginning of his career and was already beginning to experiment with the rich combined technique that he favored for his more finished drawings. In the modello for the *Idolatri*, on the other hand, darker in overall tonality, Pietro was eminently successful in deploying his technique consistently over the sheet. The left side of the Morgan drawing may be a brilliant early experiment with a technique that was fully worked out in the *Idolatri*. In the finished fresco of the *Idolatri* Pietro has eliminated one of Solomon's wives in the group at the left, showing a further step away from the constrained isocephaly of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*.

As I indicated earlier, *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* relied on a fully developed tradition that goes back to Raphael's composition in the Vatican Loggia of 1516. The genesis of Pietro's composition is extraordinarily well documented. In the Uffizi there are two drawings by Roncalli, clearly intended to be a pair, one of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* and the other of the *Idolatri* of Solomon. Roncalli's long-term association with Asdrubale Mattei and the concordance with the unusual pairing of scenes in the Gallery suggest that Roncalli, as artistic advisor to the Marquess, worked out with him the basic ideas fresco cycle. Another pair of

drawings at Windsor by Domenichino show two different versions of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Domenichino, like Pietro, ignored Roncalli's conception in favor of Raphael's. This is especially clear in what I take to be the first version. In the second, in which Solomon is seated on a dais, is closer to Pietro's version. In other words Pietro based his composition of Domenichino's second drawing, revising it with specific reference back to Raphael's composition, for example, the slave bent-over with the burden of a precious urn. There are further precedents as well, both showing a partial debt to Raphael, but, like Pietro', containing a seated Solomon, the Queen of Sheba's gesture, and the frieze-like group of women. These are the frescoes attributed to Baldassare Peruzzi in the Palazzo della Cancelleria (1519), the Casina Vagnuzzi (1521), both in Rome, and Marcantonio's engraving based on Peruzzi's composition (B. XIV.13, no. 13).

In the Idolatry of Solomon Pietro likewise ignored Roncalli's example. He appears to owe much more to Philips Galle's engraving of the subject, which was published as part of a pernicious influence of women series. The attitudes of the attending wives and concubines, the gestures, above all the pointing hand, transformed by Pietro both in its location in the composition and in its significance, and the seated god under a draped baldachin all indicate Pietro's study of the engraving/ This is even clearer in the Cleveland drawing, since, in the fresco, Pietro changed the bearded Asclepius to an imberb Apollo. Asclepius' snake then became the Delphic Python. Furthermore the delight in rendering in detail vessels, ornament, and armor show an affinity of attitude towards antiquity.

The dramatic and psychological acuity of Galle's engraving together with his greater freedom from precedent, may have inspired Pietro to improve on his first experiment in the

Mattei di Giove Gallery and to take his first major step towards his great later achievements as a narrative and decorative painter. In it the rejection of Roncalli's late mannerism is as apparent as the step back to Raphael and the adoption of the archaeological recreation of the antique, not only from Raphael, but from Italianate northerners.

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