Review

Rosso Fiorentino. Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts.

Exhibition catalogue by Eugene A. Carroll, 1987 (The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). 390 pp., 160 black and white illus., 13 color plates, color illus. on cover.

Although the handsome exhibition on Rosso Fiorentino, held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., in the autumn and winter of 1987–88, was dominated in size and splendor by the pair of tapestries after the frescoes in the Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau from the set now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, graphic works formed its core. A small group of majolica and enamel vessels completed the selection. Absent was any example of Rosso's paintings, which, according to contemporary standards of conservation, could not be lent, regardless of their importance in the artist's *oeuvre*.

Eugene Carroll's fine catalogue will doubtless be the most complete and accessible compilation of information on Rosso for some time to come, and will necessarily fill the place of a monograph on many university reading lists. One is therefore inclined to consider it in more absolute terms than the limitations of the exhibition, to which it was originally linked, would support.

Professor Carroll in fact invites this approach in his introduction, which establishes the emphasis of the exhibition as his primary argument. Adducing Vasari, Carroll claims that Rosso's fame in his lifetime, and by implication the essential character of his life's work, depended on his draughtsmanship. Before he arrived in Rome in 1524, he was known there primarily through his drawings, and during his stay until the sack of 1527, his primary activity was the production of thirty-one *disegni di stampe* for the publisher Baviera, to be engraved by Gian Jacopo Caraglio.

On the other hand, Carroll emphasizes that one can only become acquainted with Rosso's paintings through extensive travels in Italy and the United States and that most of his paintings in France are lost. He reiterates that "it was as an inventor in drawing, and not only or always as the executor of his inventions" for which Rosso was famous. This statement is justified by referring to Florentine workshop practice, in which drawing performed an essential function. Moreover, the earliest work by Rosso in the exhibition, the *Allegory of Death and Fame* engraved by Agostino Veneziano in 1517 (cat. no. 2), supports this assertion with its eloquent invention and virtuoso depiction of anatomy, abundantly present in the finished *modello* in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence (Inv. no. 6499F), which was illustrated in the catalogue, but not shown in the exhibition. Nonetheless, the presence of any single painting by Rosso would have shown his genius and individuality as a painter, thereby revealing the limitations of Carroll's argumentation. Equally essential to his art as his fantastic and sophisticated invention, so effectively communicated to other executants through drawings, was his eloquence as a manipulator of paint. His work stands out from that of other Florentines in its range of touch from loose to tight, in his imaginative exploitation of color, and in his subtle command of glazes, still preserved, for example, in the *Dead Christ* in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Rosso's excellence as a painter is in fact the overall thrust of Vasari's *Life* of the artist.

As a consequence of this view, both the exhibition and its catalogue neglect the medium in which Rosso received his first training and made his initial reputation in his native Florence. Even in the extensive discussion of the decorative work in the Gallery of Francis I, in which fresco painting played a critical role, the emphasis is placed on the function of Rosso's now lost finished drawings as models for prints. The evidence given in the catalogue for Rosso's activity as a producer of designs, which appeared in many forms—from vessels to theatrical costumes, as shown in prints from the School of Fontainebleau—overshadows his lifelong achievement as a painter.

On the other hand, the importance of prints executed after Rosso's designs, beginning in 1517 and continuing throughout his career, is remarkable. Also of prime significance are his highly finished drawings, executed not only for the printmaker but for presentation to patrons and for circulation among artists. The production of both prints and drawings became an essential part of his activity in France, where, largely because of Francis I's

predilection for multi-media decorations, artistic production became even more broadly delegated than in the Florentine workshop. The centralized power of the king was expressed in artistic form as well as in the state and economy, and this too occasioned the dissemination of images and style through drawings and prints. The abundance in French collections of careful copies of lost drawings by the *caposcuola* at Fontainebleau attest to the enhanced function of drawing as a mode of communication within and among workshops. The extreme complexity of iconography and design at Fontainebleau was conducive above all to the precise reproduction of detail possible through engravings and etchings, and required exactitude in the imitation of a master's manner and in the duplication of literal detail in copies.

The designs Rosso produced for Caraglio's prints and for the monumental frescoes and *stucchi* at Fontainebleau, which were subsequently reproduced in prints, were used through the intermediary of reproductive media as the basis for ornamental designs. Most of Rosso's designs on decorative objects were figural compositions, which remained strictly within *istoriato* vocabulary. They were frequently supplemented with additional landscape and architecture to translate them into the style of the craftsman, as several items in the exhibition demonstrated (see, for example, cat. nos. 22, 41–44, 89, 90). For the extent of Rosso's designs executed specifically for decorative objects, we must rely primarily on Vasari's account rather than on surviving drawings.[1] No equivalent survives to the drawings of Giulio Romano, Perino del Vaga, Battista Franco, or Taddeo Zuccaro, in which the artists themselves presented their figural invention within an ornamental scheme related to the form of the intended object. Rosso may well have produced such sheets, but his extant drawings demonstrate rather his use of ornament in figural compositions and in architecture. Overall, the majority show him as an inventor of allegorical and narrative scenes and, above all, as a draughtsman of human anatomy in the classic Florentine tradition.

Rosso's career as a painter was certainly a greater part of his activity than the present catalogue implies, but it was in fact compromised, primarily through factors that affected all Italian artists in the 1520s. The magnificent patronage of Julius II and Leo X during the previous decade, and the extraordinary achievement of Raphael and Michelangelo impelled young artists to Rome, who, upon their arrival, faced daunting models to assimilate and difficulty in finding worthwhile commissions. Hence the diversion into printmaking, decorative arts, and festival and theatrical design. After the disastrous Sack of Rome, some artists, like Perino del Vaga and Giulio Romano, were able to return to monumental fresco painting. Others, like Battista Franco, found it necessary to spread their talents among a broader range of media. Parmigianino, back in his native Parma, fitfully produced major paintings, but also produced designs for printmakers and personally acquired proficiency as an etcher. Rosso, in his productive relationship with Caraglio in Rome, consolidated his early success with the *Allegory of Death and Fame*, and established the precedent for his collaboration with the Fontainebleau printmakers. Furthermore, after 1530 his main patron desired grand decorations that combined fresco with three-dimensional media. It is extraordinary that this striving for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* could be so eloquently translated to the copper plate. Drawings were essential to this process, not only as precise instructions for the printmaker, but as a means of communication through which the School of Fontainebleau coalesced into the collective entity that dominated French art until the foundation of the Academy in the mid-seventeenth century.

Because his energies were pulled in this direction, Rosso's techniques as a draughtsman became highly specialized. From his initial training in Florence, he had developed an extremely precise method of figure drawing in red chalk. Clear contour lines were augmented by an exact network of crosshatching that revealed the detailed action of light on the surface forms of the bones, muscles, and tendons beneath the skin. Rosso's work of this type has a certain dryness enhanced by a luminous tonality. He continued to use this technique, as well as a freer variant reminiscent of Andrea del Sarto, in compositional studies (see for example, cat. no. 4) throughout his career. Consequently, we find that Carroll dates similar drawings to Rosso's Florentine, Roman, and Fontainebleau periods—a problem that will be discussed below.

Red chalk (heightened with white) was also the medium of Rosso's highly finished *modello* for the *Alle-*

gory of Death and Fame. Unfortunately its damaged condition does not permit us fully to interpret his means and their application toward the desired effect. In the mid-1520s he continued to use red chalk heightened with white to produce the two surviving finished drawings for Caraglio's *Gods in Niches.* Here Rosso also resorted to a red wash in order to produce fine nuances in the middle tones—an effect that the printmaker successfully reproduced. These are elegant drawings, not only intended to guide the engraver, but to please the connoisseur as well.

Rosso, perhaps conscious of the effect of his sophisticated technique on the educated eye, became increasingly adept at producing elaborate finished drawings. These drawings show an unusual feature, in which Rosso appears to have been an innovator: the combination of red and black chalk in a manner not unlike the technique *à deux crayons* as it developed through the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. From the beginning of its use as a drawing medium in the late fifteenth century, red chalk was often applied over an underdrawing in stylus or black chalk. These underdrawings, however, were never intended to be seen as part of the final sheet, and the black chalk or charcoal was usually erased. In the *modelli* for Caraglio, Rosso separated the outline from the modeling and made it stand out with special clarity by incorporating his black chalk underdrawing into the finished result. This was nothing but a way of exaggerating the effect he achieved in his figure studies in red chalk alone—an analytical view of form, in which a clear, sharp outline is set off against a precise network of crosshatching. Rosso found the double media appealing in less finished drawings as well, like the *St. Jerome* in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (cat. no. 63). In the freely rendered compositional study in the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, the *Martyrdom of SS. Marcus and Marcellinus* (cat. no. 98), the black chalk remains more of an underdrawing than in the sheets mentioned above. Nonetheless, Rosso, once he had discovered the expressive possibilities of the mixed media, found it useful to let the black chalk show through as a clarifying element in the complex design. On the other hand, the *Empedocles-St. Roch* in the J. Paul Getty Museum, shows that he continued throughout his career to exploit the traditional method in which the black chalk underdrawing was suppressed. By extending a traditional workshop technique, Rosso produced an expressive innovation that only entered into more general use after his death. Jacopo da Empoli, Federico Zuccaro, Federico Barocci, the Cavaliere d'Arpino, Guercino, and others all exploited combinations of chalks in their own ways.

For his more finished drawings Rosso favored liquid media. The famous Pandora (cat. no. 95) in pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash is typical in its exact pen work, radiant tonality, and nervous interplay of light and shade. In his most elaborate examples, mostly dating from the 1530s, he used ink and wash on a colored prepared ground with white highlights. The pen outlines, as in the *Ornamental Panel Illustrating Petrarch's First Vision of the Death of Laura* at Christ Church, Oxford (cat. no. 67), show no hesitation or exploration. All the problems had been previously solved in the preparatory drawings. The line, however, remains plastic and energetic. The white heightening is applied in a combination of crosshatching and broad brushstrokes, which works together with the brown wash and ochre preparation to give the composition a unified and delicate luminosity. The well-known *Mars and Venus* in the Louvre (cat. no. 57), executed in Venice in 1530, is drier in effect than other sheets (see cat. nos. 60, 67, 70) with very thin white washes supplementing the fine hatching over the lavender ground. Berenson, in fact, considered this drawing to be a copy.[2]

The chronology of Rosso's drawings remains to a certain extent problematic, although a useful quantity of drawings survive that are related to precisely dated projects (see cat. nos. 2a, 6, 19, 20, 51, 57). These are supplemented by drawings connected to less clearly documented works, which, through Vasari's narrative and Rosso's frequent moves during the 1520s, can be plausibly dated within a year or so, as in the case of the *Allegory of Death and Fame* and the *Loves of the Gods.* On the other hand, Vasari's account of the successive projects is insufficient to support a chronology as precise as that attempted by Carroll, since Vasari is often demonstrably inaccurate in these matters. The chronology of Rosso's French period is even less clear, because of the duration of the Fontainebleau project (1533–39) and the vagueness of its documentation (see pp. 224 ff. in the

catalogue). Virtually no drawings related directly to the project have survived, but others, which bear a general kinship with its style and content, have been assigned to the period of its execution, for example, the *Pandora*.

A third group shows affinities both with Rosso's work in Italy, even that of the early 1520s, and with his French style as well; and Carroll's dating of certain sheets is occasionally dubious. The red chalk study of a seated male nude in the British Museum, London (cat. no. 97), as Carroll observes, has a strong relationship, stylistically and technically, to early drawings like the *Study for Eve* in the Cesi Chapel, S. Maria della Pace, Rome, of 1524 (cat. no. 6) or the *Seated Male Nude* in the Uffizi (cat. no. 5). Nonetheless, he dates it to the middle of the Fontainebleau period (ca. 1536) on the basis of its resemblance to the giants that flank the fresco, the *Education of Achilles*, in the Gallery of Francis I. The actual appearance of the drawing makes this difficult to accept. On the other hand, in spite of Rosso's notable technical innovations, the continued use of his red chalk style in particular should not be forgotten, as one can observe in a comparison of the *Virtue Vanquishing Fortune* in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt (cat. no. 4), with the late *Judith and Holofernes* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (cat. no. 116). Furthermore, within shorter periods of his career, it is difficult to date a drawing like the black chalk head in the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, to the end of his stay in Rome (1527) to the exclusion of his period in Arezzo in the following years, although the drawing's affinity with the Caraglio engravings is significant. Only six of the drawings included in the exhibition are directly related to dated projects, and the latest of these comes from 1530—Rosso's presentation drawing for Francis I—and a few more are reproduced in the catalogue. If there were more, particularly from Rosso's decade in France, it would be possible to date Rosso's unrelated drawings more specifically and to articulate his development more precisely. Carroll's approach is to date individual sheets as exactly as possible, even beyond what the evidence allows, and to pay less attention to the guiding trends of Rosso's development as a draughtsman.

In some cases, drawings by Rosso are known only through prints executed after them (see, for example, cat. no. 96). Furthermore, printmaking was both an analogy to and an extension of the process of communication effected by the circulation of Rosso's finished drawings, which he executed precisely for that reason. The Washington exhibition represented the prints with handsome impressions mostly selected from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Albertina, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Uffizi, but it did not attempt a comprehensive study of the different impressions surviving in the world today. This important task would require a large exhibition specifically devoted to that problem. Little studied impressions like the Domenico del Barbiere *Gloria*, formerly at Chatsworth and recently acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art, show striking technical innovations that cast new light on the means employed by the printmakers to translate Rosso's draughtsmanship into their own media.[3]

One can hardly take exception to Carroll's detailed and circumspect discussion of the large cartoon in the Royal Academy, London, related to Michelangelo's *Leda* (cat. no. 102). As Carroll argues, Vasari mentions such a cartoon among Rosso's property after his death, and the cartoon in London bears a plausible similarity to Rosso's style in his paintings and drawings. But as with most cartoons, with the exception of Raphael's comparatively abundant legacy, it is impossible to prove authorship with certainty. This could be done only if a finished painting or a directly related working drawing were available for comparison. However, technical study of the cartoon, above all using infrared reflectography, would be worthwhile.

Carroll's treatment of major works like the Caraglio prints, the Pavilion of Pomona, and the Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau goes far beyond questions specific to the graphic works on view. His intent is to provide the reader with comprehensive information about the works, including discussions of iconography. The catalogue is perhaps least satisfactory in that regard, since it rarely goes beyond a detailed, balanced summary of older work, above all, that of the Panofskys. Particularly unhelpful, moreover, is the reference to Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths* for the ancient sources on the Labors of Hercules. A full discussion of Rosso's possible sources is clearly beyond the scope of the catalogue, but reference works like Roscher or Pauly-Wissowa would have given

the interested reader a more reliable guide to the sources Rosso and his audience are likely to have known.[4]

It is most unfortunate that the usefulness of the catalogue is impaired by the uneven quality of the reproductions. While some, including those in color, are adequate or better, others are seriously deficient in detail and tonal range. In most cases, it is impossible to use the reproductions of the prints for even the most rudimentary comparison of impressions, and many of the drawings fare no better.

Professor Carroll deserves great credit for his critical work on Rosso's *oeuvre*, which extends back to his 1964 dissertation.[5] As a result of his work, the connoisseurship of Rosso's drawings and paintings, as well as his stature as an artist, are now much better understood than when Berenson so bitterly denounced him in his *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*.[6]

Since the exhibition, few discoveries have enlarged the corpus of Rosso's drawings,[7] but progress has begun in the interpretation of his work. The important symposium, held at the Courtauld Institute, London, in December 1988, signaled the beginnings of a search for new outlooks on Rosso's achievement through documentation, connoisseurship, and specialized issues like the analysis of the artist's use of scientific anatomy.[8] Today, a fresh consideration of the complex iconography of Rosso's allegories through close study of contemporary sources and the retrospective wisdom emerging from the past quarter century of critical theory would be especially fruitful, as would an exhaustive study of the prints produced after Rosso's designs.[9] As Rosso studies continue to branch out in new directions, Carroll's work—both in this catalogue and in his dissertation, in which the paintings are more extensively discussed—will provide a most valuable anchor in the essential connoisseurship of his *oeuvre*.

Michael Miller

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence, 1906, vol. 5, p. 170.
2. Bernard Berenson, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, Chicago, 1938, vol. 2, p. 317, no. 2460.
3. This observation is indebted to the research of Starr Siegele, formerly Assistant Curator in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Cleveland Museum of Art.
4. W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, 1884—; A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, and W. Kroll, *Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 1893—.
5. Eugene A. Carroll, *The Drawings of Rosso Fiorentino*, 2 vols., New York and London, 1976 (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1964).
6. Berenson, 1938, vol. 1, pp. 232 ff.
7. I am inclined to accept the copy after an *ignudo* on the Sistine Ceiling at Chatsworth (*Old Master Drawings from Chatsworth*, exh. cat. by Michael Jaffé, 1987, no. 68) as well as the red chalk study for the Madonna and Child in the *Dei Altarpiece* that appeared on the art market in 1990 (Sotheby's, London, 2 July 1990, lot no. 19).
8. Excerpts from the symposium were published in the *Burlington Magazine*, CXXXI, 1989; *Print Quarterly*, 7, 1990, pp. 164–67; and the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1991.
9. See Sylvie Béguin, "Rosso Fiorentino's St. Peter and St. Paul," *Print Quarterly*, 7, 1990, pp. 164–67, as an example of the direction such studies could take and what can be learned from them about the broader scope of Rosso's activity.