

EXHIBITS

A Glimpse into the Minds of Renaissance Artists

There is a rare, two-sided sheet of drawings, five hundred years old, now on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, as part of a special exhibition which will be on public view until early January. It is a page from the “Libro dei Disegni” assembled and mounted by Giorgio Vasari, the first art historian, who lived in the Sixteenth century. This object is right in the middle of the first room of the exhibition, where it catches your eye.

Vasari was also, “the first systematic collector who considered issues of quality and historical significance in creating a collection that spanned the development of Italian draftsmanship from Cimabue to his own time. His drawings were concrete companions to his written *Vite* [*Lives of the Artists*], exemplifying the work of his predecessors and contemporaries, and at the same time providing a view of their creative processes. Vasari anticipated not only the activities and outlook of the many great collectors in successive centuries, but the historical and didactic approach taken by museums in our own era.” So writes George Goldner in the catalogue of “The Touch of the Artist: Master Drawings from the Woodner Collections,” one of two shows of European Old Master drawings which are simultaneously running at the Gallery.

The second exhibit, “A Great Heritage: Renaissance and Baroque Drawings from Chatsworth,” displays a cross-section of many of the most priceless drawings out of nearly two thousand that make up the collection of the Dukes of

Devonshire in England, the finest such private collection in the world. It is also accompanied by a fine catalogue in which every drawing is illustrated in color.

A tale hangs between these two collections, because some drawings that used to be “Chatsworths” are now “Woodners.” The Vasari page, made up of ten separate drawings by the major Florentine masters Botticelli and Filippino Lippi, was first displayed in Washington thirty-three years ago—as part of a show which toured several U.S. museums at that time, of drawings from Chatsworth. This drawing was sold to pay British death duties in 1984 and came into the hands of the New York and Washington-based architect and

real estate developer, Ian Woodner. Since 1991, when it was purchased from the Woodner Estate by the National Gallery, it has belonged to the American public.

This is as it should be, and perhaps the 500-year odyssey of the “Vasari page” through successive hands of artists and oligarchs and financiers, to finally belong to an institution founded under President Franklin Roosevelt during World War II, can be taken as an example of the universal value of the European Renaissance vision for the construction and preservation of the modern nation-state. This art centers on portraying the human person and the natural environment which we human beings are called upon to self-consciously

master. The whole premise of the Renaissance discovery of science and statecraft, was to build a society of constantly decreasing imperfection in the realization of each individual’s heritage as a being created in the image of God. No matter to what degree we personally may physically resemble—or not resemble—the figures who dominate the drawings now on display in Washington, they speak to each of us directly of the joys and sorrows of building a human society.

Not only has no other art in the world so elevated individual consciousness; but within the sphere of “Western civilization” itself, in the domain of the visual arts, the last two centuries have seen a precipitous decline in the expression of this principle. These drawings bespeak a vision which is nearly lost and must be recovered.



Fra Bartolommeo, “Two Angels: One Blowing a Trumpet, the Other Holding a Staff,” c.1500.

Woodner Collections

Old Master Drawings

A few words need to be said about what “old master drawings” are. In recent decades, scholars have discovered underneath the mural paintings of Tuscany extensive sketches which were used by artists to prepare their work. But only in the middle of the 1400’s did paper become cheap enough, to be independently used in a process of thinking through a picture. This was driven by the same desire to feed a population hungry for literacy, as the expanded business of copying books, which also fed the invention of movable-type printing. Thus, we can see that drawings of all kinds went hand in hand with the spread of books to larger and larger segments of the population. In Europe, in contrast to China, however, writing and picture-making never merged into each other.

The European Renaissance artist used drawings to experiment with a composition before committing himself to one specific design. He then also used drawings to work out the execution, such as drawing a figure from a live model to study the pose, a study of drapery, or a separate study of the perspective construction. Different media—pen and ink, wash and brush, and various

colors of chalk, as well as different textures and colors of paper—would be employed to serve the specific purpose for which the study was being made. Drawings were not merely a way for the individual artist to think through and prepare a painting, sculpture, or building; they were also, and especially, a way to communicate to one’s associates and students who might be involved in executing the work. Such drawings would be used over and over again in what came to be, in Raphael’s studio and even more so later, with Rubens, a quasi-industrial system of ordering the production of art.

As the Renaissance put a unique emphasis on the creative individual, it was only natural that, eventually, such drawings would have been recognized for qualities that went beyond their initial workshop purpose. Drawings give us a glimpse into the inner workings of a creative mind. Early along, drawings began to be made that were intended to be valued as final works of art in their own right, and be sold or given by the artist to a client; but even such quotidian items as Raphael’s studies, like his red chalk drawing of an antique marble horse in Rome (Woodner) or the nude studies from models and the marvelous

head of an apostle used to prepare his Transfiguration altarpiece (Chatsworth), quickly came to be recognized as beautiful works independent of their purpose as a means to an end.

At the present time, a journey to the Devonshire mansion in remote Chatsworth—one which this reviewer once undertook—is pretty arduous, not to mention expensive. Yet even if all of the Dukes of Devonshire’s collections eventually find their way into public hands, as I believe they will, they will still not be easily accessible to the public. Drawings, like all works of art on paper, are particularly fragile and vulnerable to deterioration when subjected to light for an extended time. This is why they come out for occasional shows and then are rotated back into the boxes where they are kept (unframed) on mounts. This makes the present opportunity to see the “Chatsworth” and “Woodner” drawings in Washington, a very precious one.

The Exhibits

I will conclude with a few observations about individual drawings and the different character of the two shows. The truly remarkable quality of Ian Woodner’s collection—assembled since 1959 and much



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Guercino, “A River in Flood, with Peasants with Axes and Other Tools,” c.1620.

Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth

of it acquired during the 1980’s, when it cannot have been easy to find masterpieces not yet in public hands—can be seen above all in the first and last rooms of the show. The first rooms display his strong holdings in the early Renaissance, especially the German Renaissance. No reproduction can possibly do justice to the Albrecht Dürer hand-illuminated illustrations around a printed page of a book in Greek, dedicated to his friend and patron, the Nuremberg humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, to mention

only one of the treasures you will find here. In the last room are Woodner's four original drawings by Goya, two dating from the sunset years of Goya's life after he was eighty years old, and a most unusual Picasso study from the early years before cubism, before this artist squandered his talent in the making of "modern art." The catalogue of this show, edited by Margaret Morgan Grasselli, called upon fifty-two scholars, experts in each area, to write the entries and as a result, it is particularly distinguished.

The Chatsworth collection, of course, contains more great works than the Woodner, especially when it comes to the acknowledged major masters such as Raphael, Rembrandt, and Rubens. One thing which is especially startling in both shows, however, is the freshness of the drawings, which require no "interpretation" to speak to a modern viewer. In Raphael's Chatsworth drawing of a "Mother Reading to a Child" [SEE inside back cover], the child looks out so directly that it hardly seems that five hundred years have passed since this scene was recorded. This drawing, selected for illustration on the front cover of the catalogue, is complemented by musical penmanship of the c.1500 sketch of "Two Angels" by Fra Bartolommeo, which is reproduced on the front of the Woodner catalogue. Presumably, these choices were made independently (even though both catalogues match in size), but the combined effect is to proclaim the primacy of the High Renaissance of Central Italy as the pinnacle of human achievement in the visual arts.

At the same time, many visitors will here gain their first appreciation for the great draftsmen of the Seventeenth century (other than Rembrandt). It may take some arguing to get most Twenti-



Sir Anthony van Dyck, "Head and Forequarters of a Gray Horse," 1619.

eth-century viewers to connect emotionally with the rhetorical altarpieces of the Catholic Reform which made up much of the public output of the Carracci family, and their pupils Guercino and Guido Reni. But no such introduction is needed to involve us in Annibale Carracci's poignant red chalk portrait of a hunchback boy inscribed "I don't know if God will help me" [SEE inside back cover], in Reni's sketch of a woman looking over her shoulder, or in the multi-faceted drawings by Guercino, one of the greatest draftsmen who ever lived. The Chatsworth Guercinos include a stormy river-landscape that descends directly from Leonardo da Vinci, and a delicate miniature altarpiece in red chalk, showing a cloud-borne Madonna and Child bestowing rosaries on St. Dominic and St. Catherine of Siena. Similarly, while Anthony van Dyck's painted aristocratic portraits bespeak a very disturbing sensibility, his powerful study of a horse in motion stands up well to comparison with horses by Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael.

One unique feature of the paired exhibits is the opportunity to reflect on

not only the act of drawing, but also on how the process of collecting and emulating has worked during the past five centuries of Western art. You can run up and down the stairs in the National Gallery's East Building and compare two Holbein portraits of the same youth, and decide for yourself which is really by Holbein (the catalogues suggest that the Chatsworth version is the original, and Woodner's a good copy). You can enjoy in No. 68 from Chatsworth, the tailpiece of Padre Resta's album showing the Oratorian priest showing off an album of drawings to guests. There is the page with which we began, of course, in which Vasari selected the drawings by his Florentine forerunners,

attributed them, arranged them according to his own taste, and drew frames. You can enjoy the brilliant drawing of the "Wing of Blue Roller" by Hans Hoffmann (d.1595) [SEE inside back cover], a later Nuremberg artist who successfully passed off his work as that of Albrecht Dürer (Dürer's own drawing of a Blue Roller was exhibited in Washington in the "Circa 1492" show a few years ago). All of these examples point to the fact that preserving and collecting drawings has been a key factor in the dialogue which has driven Western art forward for hundreds of years. And since Plato at least, dialogue has been the very soul of great art.

—Nora Hamerman

You can see the two shows in tandem in Washington until Dec. 31. The Chatsworth drawings (and by the way, this is going to be the last loan show of a broad selection from Chatsworth, with future traveling shows to be devoted to single artists or schools) will be seen at New York's Pierpont Morgan Library from Jan. 18 to April 21, 1996; the Woodner drawings will stay on in Washington until Jan. 28.