

EXHIBITS

Making Visible the ‘Motion of the Mind’

*Morto é il disegno or che
Filippo parte.*

(Drawing is dead now
that Filippo is gone.)

—Lost epitaph of
Filippino Lippi, San Michele
Visdomini, Florence, 1504

The first major exhibition of the work of Filippino Lippi (1457-1504), one of the most important artists of the Fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance, was on display at New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art from Oct. 28, 1997 to Jan. 11, 1998. Entitled “The Drawings of Filippino Lippi and His Circle,” the exhibit brought together rare works on loan from museums around the world, including 117 drawings—80 by Filippino—plus others by Fra Filippo Lippi (Filippino’s father), Sandro Botticelli, Piero di Cosimo, Raphael Sanzio, and other Florentine masters.

“Filippino Lippi is the only major artist of this period with enough surviving work for a serious drawings exhibition, with the exception of Leonardo,” writes George R. Goldner, curator of the exhibition, who adds that, in assembling the exhibit, “the drawings were chosen as works of beauty”—something easily attested to by visitors to the exhibit.

Student of Renaissance Masters

Filippino began life in the shadow of scandal, having been born the son of the Florentine painter and Carmelite monk, Fra Filippo Lippi, and Lucrezia Buti, a nun from the convent of Santa Margherita. (Being born out of wedlock was no bar to success as an artist, however, as Leonardo’s own illegitimate birth attests.) Despite Filippino’s colorful origins, Vasari reports that he led an exemplary life, joining the Confraternity



Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio



National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

“Male Saint Holding the Body of the Dead Christ with Angels Bearing Instruments of the Passion,” drawing (top) and painting, c. after 1500.

of Saint Paul, one of the strictest brotherhoods in Florence, and, later, the Confraternity of Saint Job.¹

Filippino first apprenticed in his father’s studio, where he learned his art, assisting Filippo with such notable projects as the murals in the choir of Spoleto Cathedral; later, he became an assistant to the painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), who was himself a student of Fra Lippi. And, while these influences on Filippino were important, especially in his early works, he would later learn a

1. Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), Florentine painter and architect, best known for his biographies of the artists of the Renaissance, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors*, first published in 1550, now widely available in English as *The Lives of the Artists*.

great deal from Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), especially in the techniques of *sfumato* and *chiaroscuro*.²

Motion of the Mind

The particular insight gained by studying an artist’s drawings, is that they reveal the creative process by which he works his ideas out, as he turns them into a finished work of art. Hence, the “motion of the mind” of the artist becomes visible in itself. This is especially true when both the drawing, and the finished work of art, can be viewed side by side. There are several such instances in the Lippi exhibit, including the cartoon (drawing) “Male Saint Holding the Body of the Dead Christ with Angels Bearing Instruments of the Passion,” both in pen and brown ink with brown wash, and a finished painting of the same subject, on panel.

Looking at the drawing, we see that it is quite elaborated, well developed, and, therefore, closely related to the finished work. The painting is a predella panel, usually one of several small works, located at the bottom of a large altarpiece (itself usually composed of several panels). Artists of this period often had much greater freedom in both

2. *Sfumato* comes from the Italian word, “to vanish”; it was invented by Leonardo to depict the changes in atmospheric perspective, including transitions between colors, and between light and shade; in his notes on painting, Leonardo says that light and shade should blend “without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke.” *Chiaroscuro*, literally, light-dark; the technique of using contrasts between light and shade, and the subtleties of shadow, to model three-dimensional forms in space; hence, a key element in perspective.

the selection of subjects, and the execution, of the predella panels, than they had in the main altarpiece, which was often strictly assigned by the patron who commissioned the work. So, it is often these smaller panels that tell us more about the artist's own thinking, than the larger parts of the main altarpiece.

Although the drawing and painting are quite similar, there are some notable changes in the painting, through which the artist sought to focus our thoughts on the content of the Passion story, as he developed the finished work. In the drawing, the representation of Christ has more the quality of an anatomical study, whereas, in the final painting, we are made to focus on the peaceful expression of the face, and the limpness of the body, which is emphasized by the heaviness of the arms, which have become longer and more substantial. This "soft" quality is underscored by the sinewy motion of the fabric which wraps around Christ.

Subtle changes have also been made in the composition. The opening of the cave, now directly behind the figure of Christ, illustrates the use of *chiaroscuro* to achieve a dramatic effect. (Note, also, the confident manner in which Filippino uses broad brushstrokes to suggest the rough stones of the cave, whose texture is contrasted to that of the angels' feathery wings, which are nonetheless rendered using the same economy of technique.)

Another small change in the structure of the composition—drawing the angels in closer to the central triangle, formed by Christ and the Saint, and enfolding them within the same shadow that surrounds the dead Christ—reinforces the pyramidal shape, whose triangular stability suggests an unchanging Eternity. And, the changed expression on the face of the angel to the left of the panel—who now gazes directly at the face of Christ, whereas in the original drawing, the angel's gaze is more ambiguous—helps to direct our eyes to Christ's countenance also.



Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig

Left: "Head of an Elderly Man Turned to the Right with Downcast Eyes," drawing, 1480-83. Right: Masaccio and Filippino Lippi, "Raising of Theophilus's Son and St. Peter Enthroned," fresco, Brancacci Chapel. Right, below: fresco detail.

figure standing third from the left, in the "Raising of Theophilus's Son," who gestures to his companions, toward the dramatic scene before them.

Del Pugliese may also be the model for St. Peter, himself, as he looks out, rather gravely, from the bars of his cell, in the previous fresco in the cycle. The figure looks older, and more sober, than the St. Peter of Masaccio's earlier frescoes, as he listens intently to St. Paul, who gestures with his right hand, telling Peter of a discussion he has just had with Theophilus,

The Brancacci Chapel

Perhaps Filippino's most significant work, and certainly that for which he is best known, was the completion of the fresco cycle depicting the life of St. Peter, in the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, which had been left unfinished some fifty years earlier by the great Masaccio, and his assistant, Masolino. There is little doubt that Filippino was strongly influenced by Masaccio, and it was probably from the earlier master that Filippino learned the art of naturalistic portraiture.³

One drawing in the Metropolitan exhibit which demonstrates this in a very powerful way is the *Head of an Elderly Man Turned to the Right with Downcast Eyes*. Clearly a portrait, it is generally believed to be that of Piero di Francesco del Pugliese (1428-1498). The exhibit catalogue suggests that he may have been the model for the dignified

the prefect of Antioch. Paul had gone to Theophilus, who had imprisoned Peter, and told him that Peter had the power to resurrect the dead. Theophilus responded that he would immediately release Peter, if he were able to resurrect his son, who had died fourteen years before.

If we compare the drawing of the elderly man, to that of the Brancacci St. Peter, we might see why Filippo chose the man in the drawing for his model of the saint, even though he had to alter his appearance somewhat. Try to imagine what the pensive man with the downcast eyes might look like, if he were to lift his head and raise his eyes. This is not the haughty, sometimes angry Peter we see in the earlier frescoes of the Chapel series.

In the next fresco scene, we see St. Peter after his release from prison, when he was taken immediately to the tomb of the son of Theophilus, and performed the miracle of resurrection. As a result of this, the entire population of Antioch were converted to Christianity. (The same fresco cycle gives us a self-portrait of Filippino, who places himself at the far right of the crowd in the "Martyrdom of St. Peter.")

3. Masaccio (1401-28) is generally credited with painting the first significant work of art using the new science of perspective, his extraordinary *Trinity*, in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.



Fire from the Gods

The subject of Prometheus is one of great importance to the spirit of Renaissance humanism, because it was Prometheus who challenged the arbitrary, irrational power of the Olympian gods, in order to bring science, represented metaphorically by fire, to improve the condition of mankind. For this, Prometheus was condemned to eternal torment by Zeus.

In "Prometheus Stealing the Celestial Fire" [SEE inside front cover, this issue], however, Filippino chooses to depict Prometheus at his moment of triumph, as he steals the fire from the false gods of Mt. Olympus for the benefit of humanity—thus, the Christian idea of *imago Dei*, man in the image of the One God, is presented in the garb of Classical mythology.

This subject may have had a special meaning for Filippo, since the period of its execution (c.1495-1500) coincided with the rule of Florence by the mad

Dominican monk, Girolamo Savonarola, who became the political and spiritual ruler of Florence after the Medici were expelled in 1494. Savonarola, the "Pat Robertson" of his day, imposed a fundamentalist regime which rejected the Renaissance concept of Christian humanism, by denouncing it as "pagan"—a slander of the Greek Classicism whose revival was the very heart and soul of the Florentine Renaissance.⁴

The mission of the artists of the Renaissance like Filippino Lippi, was precisely to revive the greatest ideas, and the most beautiful culture, of the ancient Greeks: Homer, Plato, Aeschylus, and others; to celebrate, and to nurture the creativity of the human mind. The horrors of the Fourteenth-century Black Death, the terrible New Dark Age which had descended upon Europe, was still a powerful memory. Thus,

the image of Prometheus—whose name, "Forethought," represents man's God-like act of creative discovery—was the perfect metaphor for the rekindling of the human spirit accomplished by the great artists and scientists of the Golden Renaissance.

—Bonnie James

4. Savonarola (1452-98) supported the 1494 invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France. When Pope Alexander VI (whom Savonarola had called the Antichrist) had him defrocked, Savonarola continued preaching, and was tried and executed as a false prophet.



Filippino Lippi, "St. Paul Visits St. Peter in Prison" (detail), fresco, Brancacci Chapel.