

Lelio ORSI (Novellara 1511 - Novellara 1587)

Design for a Wall Decoration

Pen and brown ink and grey wash, heightened with white.
Laid down on an 18th century English mount.
Inscribed (by Esdaile?) Lelio da Novellara (partially cut off) and 197-2 Udny 1803 at the bottom edge of the mount.
Inscribed T. Th and, in another hand, Thomas Thane on the back of the mount.
254 x 303 mm. (10 x 11 7/8 in.)

This highly finished drawing, while unrelated to any surviving work by the artist, is typical of Lelio Orsi's technique as a draughtsman, both in the manner in which the highlights are applied and the distinctive facial types. It may be likened to several similar designs for wall decorations by the artist, such as a study for part of a frieze with two seated telamons in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, a similar study in the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich, and a design for a frieze with a central panel, at Christ Church in Oxford. Two drawings in the Albertina in Vienna – a study for a decorative cartouche and a study of an urn - may also be compared stylistically and thematically to the drawing here exhibited.

In these drawings for friezes and decorative motifs, Orsi may have been inspired by the mural schemes employed by Rosso Fiorentino and Primaticcio at Fontainebleau, which he would have known through reproductive prints by Antonio Fantuzzi and others. (The influence of the Italian artists of the Fontainebleau school is also seen in some of the surviving fragments of Orsi's decorative fresco schemes.) The echoes of the work of such artists as Polidoro da Caravaggio, Raphael and Michelangelo in many of these drawings would suggest that they should be dated after his stay, or stays, in Rome. Many of Orsi's drawings for friezes, mural decorations and decorative motifs may, in fact, have been related to the extensive campaign of façade frescoes in Novellara undertaken by the artist at the behest of Alfonso Gonzaga in the 1560's, none of which survive.

Provenance:

Probably Nicholas Lanier, London (a variant of his mark [Lugt 2886] stamped at the lower left centre)
Robert Udny, London and Teddington, Middlesex (Lugt 2248)
His sale, London, T. Philipe and Scott, 4-10 May 1803, lot 304 ('LELIO ORSI DETTO DA NOVALLARA…One - a rich monument, fine pen and Indian ink, heightened, and highly finished'), sold for £19
William Esdaile, Clapham Common, London (Lugt 2617)
His sale, London, Christie's, 18 June 1840, lot 162 ('Lelio da Novellara: An Architectural design, with

Caryatides; fine'), sold together with the following lot, also by Orsi, for £2.6.0
Possibly Thomas Thane, London (a variant of his mark [Lugt 2394] inscribed on the back of the mount)
Private collection, Iceland
Anonymous sale, New York, Sotheby's, 28 January 1998, lot 4
P. & D. Colnaghi, London, in 1999
Private collection, London.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1999, no.4.

Artist description:

'Lelio Urso in architectura magno, in pictura majori, et in Delineamentis optimo', reads the epitaph on the tomb of Lelio Orsi, a provincial painter of considerable talent about whom relatively little is known today. He is not mentioned by Vasari or by any other early sources, and most of his paintings are now lost, save for a few easel pictures and some fresco fragments. The son of a minor painter, Orsi is first recorded in 1536 in Reggio Emilia, where he worked on the design of a triumphal arch to celebrate the entry of Ercole d'Este into the city. He continued to work extensively in Reggio Emilia, decorating the façade of the Torre dell'Orologio there in 1544. By 1546 Orsi was working for the Gonzaga of Novellara, a minor branch of the Mantuan family, who remained his most important patrons throughout his career.

While he may have made a first visit to Rome some time in the late 1540's, he was definitively in the city from 1554 to 1555, and it was here that the influence of Michelangelo was added to the dominant early influence of Correggio, effecting a profound change in Orsi's style. Throughout the 1560's he continued to work for the Gonzaga of Novellara, decorating their villa at Bagnolo and providing frescoes for the villas of the Casino di Sotto and the Casino di Sopra, as well as the Rocca di Novellara; unfortunately very little survives of any of these large-scale decorative projects. In 1563 Alfonso Gonzaga decreed that all the houses in Novellara should be decorated with facade frescoes, and Orsi was given the responsibility of designing and executing several of these, including for his own home. A number of drawings by Orsi for such facade and wall decorations are known, although for the most part the frescoes themselves do not.

As only fragments of his mural paintings survive, Orsi's style as a painter is best seen in a small number of cabinet pictures of mythological and religious subjects that he produced; works which show the continued influence of Michelangelo, Correggio and the studio of Raphael. Little is known of Orsi's activity in the last fifteen years of his career, which are thought to have been spent working in Reggio Emilia before his death in Novellara at the age of seventy-six.

Lelio Orsi's drawings – many of which are designs for wall or façade decorations - have survived in greater number than his paintings, and were highly regarded in his lifetime. Often displaying the particular influence of Michelangelo, Orsi's drawings are characterized by a refined technique and an imaginative approach to composition. The inventories of the Gonzaga collections at Novellara list several sheets by the artist, and enough contemporary copies of his drawings exist to show that they were widely known and appreciated. In later years the 18th century French collector and connoisseur Pierre-Jean Mariette noted how Orsi's drawings were popular with collectors, writing that 'les desseins de ce peintre sont fort recherchés. Il a une assez belle plume, et joint au goût terrible de Michel-Ange les graces aimables du Corrège'. Significant collections of drawings by Lelio Orsi are today to be found in the British Museum, the Louvre, the Uffizi and the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.