Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



SPANISH SCHOOL

The Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, heightened with white, on blue paper, with double framing lines in brown ink.
The outlines pricked for transfer.
Inscribed Barozzo on the verso.
173 x 442 mm. (6 3/4 x 17 3/8 in.) [image]
190 x 459 mm. (7 1/2 x 18 1/8 in.) [sheet]

The present sheet is part of a large and interesting group of drawings by a handful of Spanish artists working at the monastery complex of San Lorenzo de El Escorial in the late 16th century. The monastery of El Escorial, fifty kilometres northwest of Madrid, had been founded by King Philip II of Spain in 1563, and the drawings of this distinctive group were executed as designs for embroidery (bordaduría) intended for the liturgical vestments of the priests - chasubles, copes, dalmatics and so forth - or as ornamental coverings for the altars.

Drawn in pen and brown wash on blue, blue-green or blue-grey paper, these designs for embroidered vestments are among the most numerous and significant examples of 16th century Spanish draughtsmanship. As the French scholar Lizzie Boubli has described them, 'This collection of drawings [is] today the most abundant and the most harmonious [known] from Renaissance Spain.' The drawings depict scenes from the Old Testament and the Gospels, and seem to be the product of a large workshop at the Escorial. The majority of the extant drawings from this group are still to be found in two albums kept in the Royal Library at the Escorial. Numbering close to a hundred sheets, these highly finished drawings can in part be dated, on the basis of documentary evidence, to between 1587 and 1589.

Many of the designs are, like the present sheet, finely and extensively pricked for transfer to an embroidery pattern. In common with almost all of the drawings in the library at the Escorial, however, the sheet does not show evidence of pouncing, which would indicate that a second, substitute cartoon was used to transfer the design to the actual fabric. This would have been done by backing the original drawings with a second sheet of paper that would serve as the substitute cartoon. The pricking of the outlines of the primary drawing would be transferred to the substitute cartoon beneath, which would then be pounced to transfer the design to the fabric, leaving the original drawings undamaged, and kept in an album for posterity.

As Mark McDonald has written of these embroidery designs, 'most of the drawings in this group [are] executed in a carefully worked mixed technique: pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash, and white heightening over light black underdrawing on blue paper. The precision and regularity of the pricking is remarkable, demonstrating the importance of transferring an accurate copy of the image for the embroidery while preserving the original sheet.' Indeed, this finely-pricked drawing of The Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles is in exceptional condition.

It has been noted that there must have been several masters and their workshops, each with numerous

assistants, working within the Escorial on the preparation of these cartoons for embroidery designs, or bordados. The leading artists and chief designers of this group, and the only ones documented by name in records of payment, are Miguel Barroso (c.1538-1590) - to whom the present sheet has been attributed in the past, to judge from the inscription on the verso - and Diego López de Escuriaz, who is recorded as working at the Escorial between 1587 and 1597. As has been noted, 'King Phillip II took great interest in the vestments that were to be used for the Escorial, and artists were well paid for their designs.'

A tentative attribution to Diego López de Escuriaz may be suggested for the present sheet on stylistic grounds, by comparison with other embroidery designs by or attributed to him at the Escorial and elsewhere. Executed with a refined touch of the pen and with a precise application of wash and white heightening, López de Escuriaz's drawings are notable for the degree of characterization accorded the individual figures. In this drawing of The Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles, the facial types, the way in which the hair and beards are drawn, and the manner of treating drapery all find parallels in other embroidery designs given to López de Escuriaz, such as an Adoration of the Magi in the Louvre and a Last Supper in the Yale University Art Gallery.

The Italianate style and technique of these embroidery designs, and in particular the use of extensive white heightening and blue paper, would suggest that the Spanish artists working at the Escorial were influenced by the work of the Italian painters who were also active at the monastery, notably Federico Zuccaro and Pellegrino Tibaldi. They are also likely to have turned for inspiration, in terms of compositional ideas, to the extensive collection of Flemish, German and Italian prints assembled by Philip II and also kept at the Escorial.

Apart from those drawings still remaining in two albums in the library of the Escorial, examples of this distinctive group of Spanish embroidery designs are rare. A number of the drawings, perhaps part of the contents of one album, seem to have left the Escorial in the middle of the 19th century. These include four sheets today in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, as well as a handful of drawings in public collections outside Spain; in the British Museum, the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, the Louvre, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen and the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

The drawings and cartoons for embroidery produced at the Escorial, of which the present sheet is a particularly fine example, make a significant contribution to scholarly appreciation of the still relatively little-known field of 16th century Spanish draughtsmanship. Furthermore, as Boubli has recently written, 'These embroidery designs are indispensable for our understanding of the functioning of a specialized workshop in the unique social and cultural milieu at the Escorial, which comprised a sort of autonomous city in which a wide variety of artisans contributed to a post-Tridentine ideology...In broad terms, this rare cache of primary material of great significance...might shed light on the drawing practice of Spanish artists and clarify the impact of foreign influences – or indirect ones through prints - upon a native tradition.'

Provenance:

Probably from an album once in the library of the monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, until dispersed in the 19th century
Anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 1 July 1987, lot 3 (as Florentine School, late 16th Century)
Private collection, Paris.