

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



16th Century SPANISH SCHOOL

The Resurrected Christ Appearing to Saint Peter

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, heightened with white, on blue paper.

The outlines pricked for transfer.

371 x 458 mm. (14 5/8 x 18 in.)

This very large sheet is part of a fascinating group of drawings by Spanish artists working at the large monastery complex of El Escorial, northwest of Madrid, in the late 16th century. The monastery had been founded by Philip II in 1563, and the drawings of this distinctive group were executed as designs for embroidery intended for the liturgical vestments of the priests - chasubles, copes, dalmatics and so forth - or as ornamental coverings for the altars. (Each of the three main altars in the basilica at the Escorial had fifty sets of embroidered vestments and altar frontals, which were changed according to the religious calendar and the type of service.) Drawn in pen and brown wash on blue, blue-green or blue-grey paper, these drawings for embroidery designs seem to have been the product of a large workshop at the Escorial. Depicting scenes from the Old Testament and the Gospels, they are among the most numerous and significant surviving examples of 16th century Spanish draughtsmanship.

The majority of the extant drawings from this group are still to be found in two albums in the library at the Escorial. Numbering close to a hundred sheets, these drawings can in part be dated, on the basis of documentary evidence, to between 1587 and 1589. Many of the Escorial drawings are, like this Risen Christ Appearing to Saint Peter, finely and extensively pricked for transfer to the embroidery pattern. In common with most of the Escorial drawings, however, the present sheet does not show any evidence of pouncing. This would suggest that a second, substitute cartoon was used to transfer the design to the actual fabric, which would have been done by backing the original drawing with a second sheet of paper. 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 drawing undamaged, and kept in an album for posterity.

As Mark McDonald has noted of the Escorial 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 large and finely-pricked drawing of The Risen Christ Appearing to Saint Peter is in exceptional condition.

Apart from those drawings still remaining in the library of the Escorial, other 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 small number of drawings in public collections outside Spain; examples are in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, the British Museum in London, the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans, the Musée du Louvre in Paris and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen. The present sheet is likely to have come from the same source as these drawings.

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 embroidery designs. The leading artists and chief designers of this group, and the only ones documented by name in records of payment, are Miguel Barroso (c.1538-1591) and Diego López de Escuriaz (died c.1623). Among the body of embroidery designs still at the Escorial, the present sheet seems closest in style to the work of the as-yet unidentified 16th century artist known as the 'Master A', by comparison with such drawings by him as The Healing of the Leper, which, like several other drawings attributed to the Master A at the Escorial, is also on greenish-blue paper and pricked for transfer.

In the Italianate style and technique of these drawings, the Spanish artists working at the Escorial may have been influenced by the work of the Italian painters who were also active at the monastery in the late 16th century, notably Pellegrino Tibaldi and Federico Zuccaro. They may also 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. As Lisa Banner has noted, 'More than mere documents of artisan production, the Escorial designs for embroidery reveal the impact of Northern European and Italian mannerism on Spanish art. This became the leading style of drawing at the Escorial embroidery workshop, and was later adopted by Madrid court artists.'

The drawings and cartoons for embroidery produced at the Escorial, of which the present sheet is a particularly fine and sizeable example, make a significant contribution to scholarly appreciation of the still relatively little-known field of 16th century Spanish draughtsmanship. Furthermore, as one recent scholar has stated, '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.'

Exhibitions

New York, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1989, no.4 (as Spanish School, 1587-1589); Stanford University, Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Classic Taste: Drawings and Decorative Arts from the Collection of Horace Brock, 2000.