

Isaac OLIVER (Rouen c.1558/65 - London 1617)

The Virgin and Child Enthroned

Pen and black ink, with blue and brown wash, heightened with white, over a black chalk underdrawing, with framing lines in brown ink, on blue paper.

173 x 131 mm. (6 3/4 x 5 1/8 in.)

As Lindsay Stainton and Christopher White have noted, Isaac Oliver's drawings 'are remarkable for their variety of style, technique and subject-matter. They reveal an artist with a strong feeling for the medium and ready to exploit the different qualities of pen, chalk, wash, bodycolour and coloured paper in varying combinations to obtain the desired effect. He clearly attached importance to his drawings, and regarded them as his working capital, containing the wisdom of a lifetime to be handed to his chosen successor.' (Indeed, in his will, Oliver bequeathed to his son Peter 'all my drawings allready finished and unfinished [and] lymning pictures, be they historyes, storyes or any thing or limning whatsoever of my owne hande worke as yet unfinished.')

The present sheet may likely be dated to the first decade of the 17th century, following Oliver's visit to Italy in 1596, when the influence of the artistic models he would have seen and studied there was at its height. This drawing has been described by the scholar Jill Finsten as 'one of Oliver's suavest, most sophisticated maniera works…doubtless dating from the latter half of the first decade.' It has further been suggested that Oliver might also have been inspired by certain Dutch and Flemish mannerist models – typified by an engraving by Hendrick Goltzius of The Holy Family, after Bartholomeus Spranger, published in 1585 - as well as the example of the artists of the 16th century French School of Fontainebleau, such as Francesco Primaticcio and Ambroise Dubois. As Finsten has noted of the present sheet, 'of a sophistication so rarefied as to verge on decadence, the Madonna and Child are represented "all'antica" as Venus and Amor. The classicistic apparatus may well derive from

Goltzius/Spranger…but the cool eroticism and delicate, almost feminized softness of handling are unquestionably French.' Among stylistically comparable drawings by Oliver of the same date is a signed black chalk study of Antiope in the British Museum.

The first recorded owner of this drawing was General James Dormer (1679-1741), a British military officer who served as ambassador to Portugal between 1725 and 1728. As he was unmarried, at his death his estates passed to his cousin, the scholar and antiquary Sir Clement Cottrell-Dormer (1686-1758). This drawing by Isaac Oliver thence passed by descent within the Cottrell-Dormer family for several generations, to the magistrate Thomas Cottrell-Dormer JP (1894-1990).

Exhibitions

New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, Mannerism and Modernism: The Kasper Collection of Drawings and Photographs, 2011, no.43.

Literature:

The Burlington Magazine, November 1977, p.lxiii [advertisement]; Jill Finsten, Isaac Oliver: Art at the Courts of Elizabeth I and James I, Ph.D thesis, Harvard University, 1979 [pub. New York and London, 1981], Vol.I, p.155, Vol.II, pp.234-235, no.194, fig.170 (where dated c.1605-1610); Jordan Bear et al, Mannerism and Modernism: The Kasper Collection of Drawings and Photographs, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2011, pp.118-119, no.43 (entry by Justine Pokoik), and with a detail illustrated as a frontispiece.

Artist description:

The son of a Huguenot goldsmith from northern France, Isaac Oliver settled as a child with his family in London in 1568, escaping the French Wars of Religion. His early artistic training was with the English goldsmith and miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard, and he is also said to have been trained in oil painting by the Italian artist Federico Zuccaro, presumably during his brief stay in England between 1574 and 1575. (However, although several paintings by Oliver are recorded, none appear to have survived.) Oliver developed a particular reputation as a limner or miniaturist, and his first known dated work is a portrait miniature of 1587. His portrait miniatures, strongly influenced by those of his teacher Hilliard, soon began to rival those of the latter in popularity. In 1596 Oliver visited Venice and is also likely to have travelled to the Low Countries. In the early years of the 17th century he worked at the court of James I, King of England, and in 1604 was appointed 'painter for the Art of Lymning' to both Anne of Denmark, wife of the King, and Henry, Prince of Wales. Two years later he became a naturalised Englishman. Particularly influenced by Flemish and Italian (especially Venetian) art, Oliver introduced a sophisticated Mannerist sensibility, gained from his travels abroad, into English art of the period. This is especially noticeable in the handful of highly finished cabinet miniatures of Biblical subjects by the artist to have survived.

The 18th century antiquarian, engraver and writer George Vertue noted of Isaac Oliver that he often carried a small sketchbook around with him. A gifted draughtsman, he produced drawings of religious, allegorical and classical subjects – mainly in pen and ink, but also occasionally in chalk or gouache - which often display a pronounced Italo-Flemish character. As Richard Stephens has noted, 'Oliver has been called 'the first British draughtsman' for he is the first artist whom we can see using drawing to develop his ideas rather than merely creating an outline to follow...Although he chiefly worked as a portrait miniaturist, Isaac Oliver used chalk and pen drawings to think through complex religious scenes, which were intended to be executed finally as cabinet miniatures…[he was] an artist well-versed in continental art: here, for the first time, a highly capable London artist was engaging closely with contemporary European trends – notably northern mannerism – to produce complex mythological and religious compositions.' The Oliver scholar Jill Finsten concurs, commenting of the artist's small corpus of drawings that 'On the most basic level they are extraordinary simply because, with the exception of Holbein's portrait drawings (arguably a whole separate genre), this is the earliest body of drawings to appear in the history of English art. Oliver thus has claim to being considered the first English painter who was equally a serious draughtsman.'

Only relatively few drawings by Isaac Oliver are known today, some of which are signed, although none are dated. A number of his drawings, including the present sheet, display the influence of the Italian Mannerist artist Parmigianino, whose work he is likely have seen on his visit to Venice in 1596, and whose paintings he is known to have copied. Indeed, Oliver may be regarded as one of the first artists working in Britain to have had a close awareness and appreciation of Continental models, not only from his travels but also in the form of paintings and prints by Italian, French and Netherlandish artists. His drawings are, nevertheless, always original compositions and not copies, unlike much of the work of his son and pupil Peter Oliver, who was likewise a miniaturist and draughtsman.

The corpus of extant drawings by Isaac Oliver includes sheets in the collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.