

Lelio ORSI (Novellara 1511 - Novellara 1587)

Design for a Decorative Frieze, with the Rebuke of Adam and Eve and the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, heightened with white, over an underdrawing in pencil, on two joined sheets of paper.

Squared for transfer in black chalk.

A faint sketch of a mother and child in black chalk on the verso.

Inscribed lelio in black chalk on the verso.

119 x 679 mm. (4 5/8 x 26 3/4 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE HERBERT F. JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART, CORNELL UNIVERSITY, ITHACA, NY.

This highly finished drawing is a fine and typical example of Lelio Orsi's technique as a draughtsman. Although unrelated to any surviving work by the artist, it may be grouped with several similar designs for frieze decorations by the artist, all for apparently the same project; in the Uffizi in Florence, the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie in Besançon, the Musée des Beaiux-Arts in Lille, and at Kingston Lacy in Dorset. All of these drawings depict figures among acanthus leaf scrolls with Biblical or mythological subjects. The present sheet is the largest of this group. Roberto Salvini has dated these drawings to c.1563, but Vittoria Romani has suggested an earlier dating to between 1554 and 1555, shortly after Orsi's stay in Rome.

As Linda Wolk-Simon has noted, 'Orsi's frieze studies typically combine narrative subjects drawn from ancient Roman history or mythology with florid acanthus tendrils and other classicizing decorative elements. The dense compositions and tight compression of figures against the surface are deliberately evocative of ancient relief sculpture. Reminiscent in their all'antica character of the painted monochrome facades of Polidoro da Caravaggio…his frieze designs frequently contain a note of bizarre fantasy that departs from the strictly archaeologizing Roman manner.' 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 1560s, none of which survive.

The present sheet bears the mark of the Belgian portrait painter and collector Charles Emile Wauters (1846-1933). The drawing later belonged to the British art historian A. E. ('Hugh') Popham (1889-1970), who spent much of his career at the British Museum. He joined the Department of Prints and Drawings at the museum in 1912, eventually serving as Keeper of Prints and Drawings between 1945 and his retirement in 1954.

Exhibitions

Reggio Emilia, Teatro Valli, Lelio Orsi 1511-1587: dipinti e disegni, 1987-1988, no.29; New York, W. M. Brady & Co. and Thomas Williams Fine Art at W. M. Brady & Co. Ltd., Old Master Drawings, 2001, no.7; New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, Mannerism and Modernism: The Kasper Collection of Drawings and Photographs, 2011, no.16.

Literature:

Roberto Salvini, 'Su Lelio Orsi e la mostra di Reggio Emilia', Bollettino d'Arte, January - March 1951, p.82, illustrated p.80, fig.2 ('disegno di fregio, di alta qualità, della collezione privata del dr. Popham'); Elio Monducci and Massimo Pirondini, ed., Lelio Orsi, exhibition catalogue, Reggio Emilia, 1987-1988, pp.68-69, no.29; W. M. Brady & Co. and Thomas Williams Fine Art, Old Master Drawings, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2001, unpaginated, no.7; Jordan Bear et al, Mannerism and Modernism: The Kasper Collection of Drawings and Photographs, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2011, pp.64-65, no.16 (entry by Rhoda Eitel-Porter).

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.