

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



16th Century FLORENTINE SCHOOL

Design for a Tapestry: The Young Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, with touches of red and blue wash, heightened with gold and silver, with a drawn fictive, frame-like border on light brown paper, backed.

Inscribed *Salvator Rosa*. in a cartouche on the former mount.

322 x 268 mm. (12 5/8 x 10 1/2 in.) [sheet]

Given its high degree of finish and colouring, as well as the fact that it is extensively heightened with both silver and gold, this beautiful drawing is almost certainly a design for a tapestry, a suggestion further supported by the decorative motif drawn as a border around the composition. The lavish appearance of the sheet suggests that it was produced as a presentation modello, to be shown to a patron for his approval before work on the actual tapestry cartoon was begun. While certain aspects of the present sheet suggests a Northern hand, the overall effect is more in keeping with Florentine draughtsmanship of the second half of the 16th century. As the patron saint of the city, Saint John the Baptist was a popular subject in Florentine art throughout the Cinquecento, and it is more than likely that the present sheet was intended not only as a modello for a tapestry commissioned by a Florentine patron but, in all probability, a tapestry woven in Florence itself.

The first tapestry workshops in Florence were established in 1545 by the Flemish weavers Nicolas Karcher and Jan Rost, both under the patronage of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici. Unlike the tapestry workshops established earlier in Mantua and Ferrara, which were primarily concerned with providing the rulers of these city-states with furnishings for their palaces, the Rost and Karcher workshops seem to have been intended by Cosimo as the vanguard of a new Florentine industry. It appears that Cosimo wished to establish Florence as a major centre of tapestry production in Italy, and hence not only encouraged Karcher and Rost to undertake freelance commissions from other patrons, but also expected them to train local apprentices. Ducal commissions alone resulted in more than forty narrative

tapestries woven in Florence between 1546 and 1553, for the most part intended for the Palazzo Vecchio. Although woven by Flemish masters, the design of the tapestries was entrusted by Cosimo to his favoured Florentine artists, notably Agnolo Bronzino and Francesco Salviati, as well as Jacopo Pontorno and Francesco Bacchiacca. The Karcher and Rost workshops, and the local artists who provided tapestry cartoons for them, also received numerous commissions from other private patrons in Florence.

In 1554 Cosimo established a new ducal tapestry factory in Florence, known as the Arazzeria Medicea, which was run by local Italian weavers and which used less complex materials and techniques than their Flemish predecessors. While Bronzino continued to paint tapestry cartoons in the early years of the Arazzeria, the leading designer of this period was Jan van der Straet, known as Stradanus, who was to produce more than one hundred tapestry cartoons for the workshop, mainly intended for the various rooms of the Palazzo Vecchio and several Medici villas. In 1575 he was succeeded as chief designer at the Arazzeria Medicea by Alessandro Allori, whose tapestry designs were mostly for the Palazzo Pitti. After the death of Cosimo and the accession of Ferdinando I as Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1587, tapestries of religious subjects became more popular. Later artists entrusted with producing designs for the Medici tapestry factory included Ludovico Cigoli, Bernardino Poccetti and Michelangelo Cinganelli, while later in the 17th century such artists as Baccio del Bianco, Agostino Melissi, Jacopo Vignali, Lorenzo Lippi and Vincenzo Dandini also worked for the Arazzeria, which continued to operate until 1745.

Giorgio Vasari, who had himself designed cartoons for tapestries, was well aware of the elements necessary for a successful tapestry design. As he wrote, '*there must be fantastic inventions and variety of composition in the figures, and these must stand out from one another, so that they may have strong relief, and they must come out bright in colouring and rich in the costumes and vestments.*' Most of the tapestries produced by the Florentine workshops in the 16th century are distinguished by elaborate borders, often with swags of fruit and foliage or other complex motifs.

The present sheet may be tentatively associated with the work of Jan van der Straet, known as Stradanus (1523-1605), who was the foremost tapestry designer at the Arazzeria Medicea in the 1560s and 1570s. Comparisons may be drawn between the leopard in the right foreground of the composition, as well as the trees and foliage, with a tapestry of *The Meeting of Dante and Virgil* of c.1546-1549, commissioned by a member of the Salviati family of Florence and today in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Woven by Jan Rost after a design by Francesco Salviati, assisted by Stradanus, the Minneapolis tapestry - the only early Florentine Medicean tapestry in a public collection outside Italy - may be dated to between 1546 and 1549. The edge of the composition is designed to look like a framed painting, rather than the more usual decorative border found in most Italian tapestries of the period. Also comparable to the present sheet are the animals in a tapestry of *A Stag Hunt with Traps*, woven by Benedetto Squilli in 1568 after a design by Stradanus, and today in the collection of the Amministrazione Provinciale in Siena.

Only a few coloured modelli for tapestries of the Florentine Cinquecento may be identified today. In its high degree of finish and colouring, the present sheet may be compared to two drawings for a tapestry design by Ludovico Cigoli that were on the art market in 1991. The Cigoli drawing was intended for a never-executed tapestry of *Pope Sixtus V at his Desk, Inspired by the Holy Ghost*, commissioned by Alessandro Peretti, Cardinal Montalto, around 1593.

Apart from being an elaborate modello for a tapestry, this exceptionally fine sheet, with its rich colouring and the use of silver and gold heightening, was almost certainly intended as a finished presentation drawing in its own right. The non-narrative subject of the drawing, as well as the direct focus on the single figure of the saint and the relative intimacy of the composition, would suggest that the tapestry may have been intended for a private home, rather than a public setting such as a church. Indeed, the patron for whom this splendid drawing was made may have had a particular devotion to, or shared his name with, Saint John the Baptist.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., *An Exhibition of Master Drawings and Oil Sketches*, 2006, no.14.