

On Some Drawings by Giulio Romano from His Mantuan Period

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Introduction

This article examines and discusses some drawings by Giulio Pippi, known as Romano (c.1495–1546) [1]. One sheet is unpublished, while a few others are already known, although their exact destination is unknown [2]. All of them concern the Mantuan period of Giulio, who worked for the Gonzaga family from 1524 until his death. The sheets all relate to Palazzo Te, except for one linked to an altarpiece carried out by his workshop.

PALAZZO TE: THE LOGGIA OF THE SECRET APARTMENT AND THE MUSES' LOGGIA.

The large Palazzo Te in Mantua was painstakingly planned by Giulio Romano from 1525 onwards with great attention: there is possibly no single Renaissance work that benefits of such an incredible amount of preparatory drawings, created for every single decorative detail. Isolated from the main building, the so-called Secret Apartment (“Appartamento Segreto”) was decorated, as stated by documents, between 1531–34 [3].

The barrel-vault loggia facing the internal garden is fully decorated: from the pebble pavement to the painted and stuccoed ceiling. In the middle of the loggia vault the Soul brought to the sky is frescoed (Fig. 1), prepared by a finished drawing in Vienna, Albertina

(Fig. 2) [4]. An unpublished hasty pen sketch, recently on the art market (Fig. 3), precludes the Austrian sheet; there are small differences between the two drawings and the one shown here for the first time, fully displays Giulio's skill with pen and ink [5]. Konrad Oberhuber proposed that the drawings used for the vault decorations of the loggia may date to 1528–29, when the apparent commencement of the building of the Secret Apartment began, while those relating to the wall decorations may have been prepared in the early 1530s [6]. This hypothesis implies that either Giulio Romano reused some ideas drawn while working on the room of Psyche (“camera di Psiche”), or that the Secret Apartment yard began with some delay. A third option to take into consideration is that the drawings could be dated immediately before their pictorial execution [7].



Figure 1: GIULIO ROMANO and Workshop, Soul brought to the sky, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Figure 2: GIULIO ROMANO, Soul brought to the sky, Vienna, Albertina.



Figure 3: GIULIO ROMANO, Soul brought to the sky, Mantua, Private Collection.

The drawing bears additional interest because of its verso. The speedy pen ductus is not uncommon in Giulio Romano's graphic, but what is noticeable is that the rear of the (never restored) paper still shows evident if uneven traces of a thin charcoal layer. This, together with the outlines traced with a stylus on the front, tell us that the drawing is the first step of the invention. At the same time, these data's confirm what Giovanni Battista Armenini wrote in 1586 about Giulio's technique: «He would take a sheet of thin paper and on that he would draw with lead or charcoal, whichever was at hand, what he had in mind. Then, covering completely the reverse of the sheet with charcoal, he would take another clean sheet and would press the drawing or sketch onto it with a stylus of brass or silver, so that what was drawn on the first sheet was transferred to the second. Then he would delineate the transferred sketch thinly in ink, removing any marks of charcoal left by the tracing by daubing with a kerchief or another thin cloth. Thus, the delineations would be left neat and without any spot or mark under them. He would then finish the drawings by either hatching with pen or shading with wash, depending on what pleased him most at the time. A large number of his tracings were shown to me by many people in Mantua, where, as is known, he made more drawings and works than elsewhere» [8].

A second drawing concerning Palazzo Te is related to a stucco in the Muses' loggia ("loggia delle Muse") (Fig. 4), and is now in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (Fig. 5) [9, 10]. The pen sketch of a Victory holding a garland, one of the studies shown in the sheet, has been related to the Cabinet of Caesars in the Ducal Palace and especially to the Triumph of Titus and Vespasianus, now in Paris, Musée du Louvre, but the relation is not strict and precise, while the one here proposed in my opinion is [11].



Figure 4: GIULIO ROMANO and Workshop, Victory holding a garland, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Figure 5: GIULIO ROMANO, Various drawings (among them a Victory holding a garland), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

AN ALTARPIECE WITH ST. ANTHONY THE ABBOT AND ST. JOHN EVANGELIST

Giulio's workshop extensively adapted his inventions in a number of autonomous projects, also concerning altarpieces for churches in Mantova and its province, not to mention major fresco campaigns in Verona, Parma and Piacenza [12]. Only a few of the altarpieces show narrative episodes, whilst all of them represent the Virgin and the Child surrounded by saints - normally in an architectural environment, seldom outdoors. The landscape is usually confined to a portion of the background, but in some cases it constitutes the very setting of the painted figures; we have some works by Giulio's strict circle that were all conceived in that way: i.e. the altarpiece by Rinaldo Mantovano once in Sant'Agnese, now lost, or two fragments which today can be found in the parish church of Nuvolato, not far from Mantua, or the painting we are soon to discuss [13].

Let's start from a print by Master I♀Q (active in the School of Fontainebleau), dated to the early 1540s and representing Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Anthony the Abbot in a large landscape (Fig. 6) [14]. The etching combines landscape elements from Albrecht Dürer's (1471–1528) Virgin and Child with a Dragonfly and Saint Eustace etchings, with Giulio's inventions. The two main figures are drawn reversed respect to their counterparts in the etching of two sheets closely referred to the same composition: A Saint John the Evangelist in Turin (Biblioteca Reale) (Fig. 7), and a Saint Anthony the Abbot in Rennes (Musée des Beaux-Arts) (Fig. 8), both limited to the figures and with no surrounding details. None of the two is an autograph by Giulio himself, and have been attributed to the same accomplished hand, perhaps Primaticcio himself, as has been suggested by Cordellier, or an artist working in his circle [15].



Figure 6: MASTER I♀Q, Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Anthony the Abbot in a Landscape, London, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.



Figure 7: GIULIO ROMANO (copy after), Saint John the Evangelist, Turin, Biblioteca Reale.



Figure 8: GIULIO ROMANO (copy after), Saint Anthony the Abbot, Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

A third drawing in Paris (Musée du Louvre), shows Saint John the Evangelist (Fig. 9) and it has been correctly associated to, by Roberta Serra, Giulio's own hand and has also been related to the print [16]. This drawing displays minor differences with the print and the two aforementioned drawings, as Saint John is looking upwards and not staring towards us. A painting recently auctioned in Milan may suggest a solution to the puzzle (Fig. 10) [17]. The painting, today in a private collection in Mantua, is the fragment of a larger canvas; it was auctioned as a Battista Dossi (doc. 1517–1548) painting but is obviously by Giulio's workshop and I may dare attribute it to Rinaldo Mantovano (c. 1502–1540). The canvas has been undoubtedly cut on all sides and its state of conserva-

tion is not perfect, having been over-cleaned, but it hints to a large composition; we cannot, of course, be sure that the original canvas also included Saint Anthony, but it seems a highly reasonable solution. If we place the canvas fragment inside the composition traced by the print (but the painted landscape was probably simplified and not inspired by Dürer), an original altarpiece of the same horizontal proportions of the etching may have been c. 230 cm large: a size compliant to such artworks. At the same time, we have no clue as to the original placement of such an altarpiece: churches dedicated to both the saints existed in Mantua, but the painting might have easily decorated an altar within a temple bearing a different title.

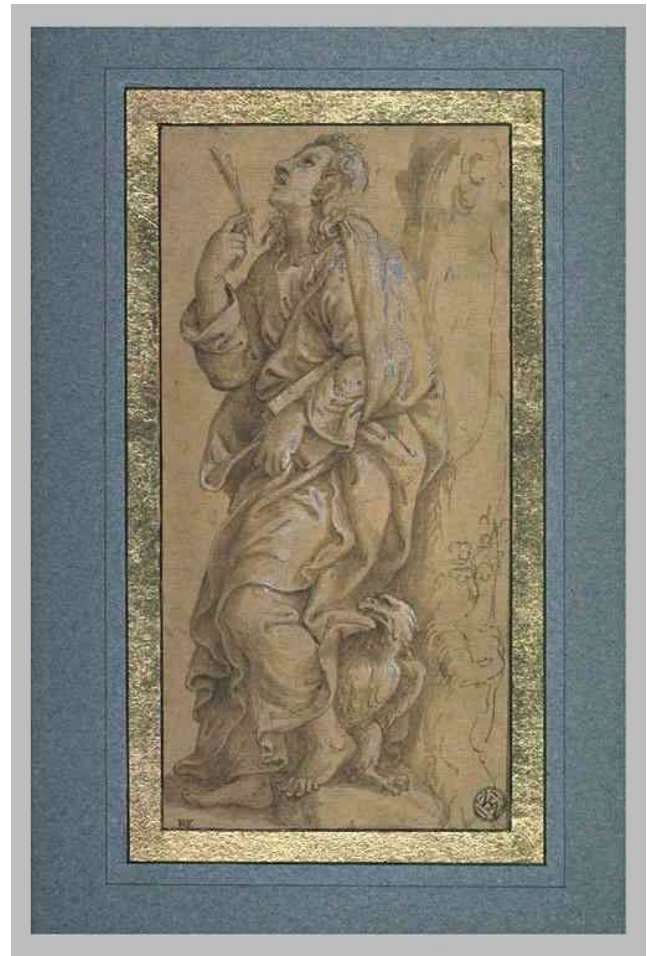


Figure 9: GIULIO ROMANO, Saint John the Evangelist, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.



Figure 10: Here attributed to RINALDO MANTOVANO, Saint John the Evangelist, Mantua. Private Collection.

The print may hence suggest how the altarpiece looked in its lower part and allows us to understand how large the altarpiece originally might have been but does not give us an exact idea of its height. The Paris drawing and the canvas fragment perfectly match, also showing the Saint looking above; this leads us to suppose that the composition included an epiphany above, which was not unusual in Giulio's outdoor compositions. A Virgin with Child might easily have occupied the higher part of the altarpiece, but we lack enough information to continue this chain of hypotheses.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish to express my gratitude to Flavia Victoria Hayes, who friendly improved my written English. I dedicate these lines to the late Renato Berzaghi.

References

1. As to the date of birth of the artist, I refer to: Enrico Parlato

(2001), Giulio Romano, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*. Institute of the Italian Encyclopedia 57: 37-50. The author reasonably proposes that Giulio was born no later than the last trimester of 1495.

2. Among the recent studies dedicated to Giulio Romano as a draftsman: Stefano L'Occaso (2019), Giulio Romano "universale", Mantua. See also Laura Angelucci, Peter Assmann and others (2019), eds., «...con una nuova e stravagante maniera». Giulio Romano a Mantova, exh. Cat., Mantua.
3. Amedeo Belluzzi (1998), Palazzo Te a Mantova 1: 477-84.
4. Inv. no. 312. Pen and brown ink, with brown wash, on black chalk, squared for transfer, 261 x 403 mm. Konrad Oberhuber (1989), in Ernst H. Gombrich and others, eds., Giulio Romano, exh. Cat., Mantua: 363; Belluzzi 1998: 484; Achim Gnann, in Laura Angelucci, Peter Assmann and others (2019): 120 no. 20.
5. Traces of black chalk, pen and brown ink, 283 x 434 mm. The drawing was auctioned in Firenze, Gonnelli, 19 April 2021, lot 121, as by Anonymous late 17th or early 18th century, and as representing the Risen Christ.
6. Oberhuber (1989): 160, 358-63.
7. I suppose no idea of Giulio's was left long unused: Stefano L'Occaso (2020), *Bollettino d'Arte* 41: 152-54.
8. Giovanni Battista Armenini, *On the True Precepts of the Art of Painting*, ed. by Edward J. Olszewski, New York, 1977: 148. (Idem, *De' veri precetti della pittura libri tre*, Ravenna, 1586: 76-77.)
9. About the stucco: Belluzzi 1998: fig. 333.
10. Inv. no. RP-T-1951-3. Pen and brown ink, 201 x 149 mm: About the drawing Lieneke C.J. Frerichs (1981), *Italiaanse tekeningen. II, de 15de en 16de eeuw*, exh. Cat., Amsterdam: 42-43 no. 80.
11. The Louvre painting is inv. 423. Oil on panel, 122 x 171 cm.
12. L'Occaso (2019): 78-87; Idem (2020), "Forza, terribilità e rilievo": il Pordenone a Piacenza e dintorni, conference proceedings: 81-97.
13. Stefano L'Occaso (2011), Museo di palazzo Ducale di Mantova. *Catalogo generale delle collezioni inventariate. Dipinti fino al XIX secolo*, Mantua: 21-22, fig. 4, for a 1833 print after the now lost Sant'Agnese altarpiece.
14. London, British Museum; inv. no. BM 1850,0527.70. Etching, 360 x 323 mm. See Stefania Massari (1993), ed., Giulio Romano pinxit et delineavit: Opere grafiche autografe, di collaborazione e bottega, exh. Cat., Rome: 95-96, fig. 89, for a c. 1530 chronology; Catherine Jenkins (2006), *Landscape in the Fontainebleau School Print*, *Print Quarterly* 23, 2: 124; Eadem (2017), *Prints at the Court of Fontainebleau, c. 1542-47*, *Ouderkerk aan den IJssel* 3, no. IQV 10.
15. The Turin drawing is inv. no. 15809. Pen and brown ink, with brown wash, heightened with opaque white, on beige paper, 215 x 86 mm. See Aldo Bertini (1958), *I disegni italiani della Biblioteca Reale di Torino*, Rome: 33 no. 197. The Rennes drawing is inv. no. 2005.2.5. Pen and brown ink, with brown wash, heightened with opaque white, on brown paper, 217 x 136 mm. See Dominique Cordellier and Varena Forcione (2005), eds., *De la Renaissance à l'Age baroque. Une collection de dessins italiens pour les musées de France*, exh. Cat., Paris: 132 no. 89 (entry by Dominique Cordellier).
16. Inv. 3620. Pen and brown ink, with brown wash, 202 x 100 mm. A note on mount dated 8 June 2012 by Roberta Serra

refers the drawing to Giulio himself.

17. Oil on canvas, 89,5 x 62 cm. Auctioned in Milan, Cambi, 30 June 2020, lot 142 (as Battista Dossi).

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