

Master Drawings



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Review

Ottavio Leoni as a Portrait Draftsman

Piera Giovanna Tordella, *Ottavio Leoni e la ritrattistica a disegno protobarocca*, Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2011. ISBN: 978-88-222-6117-5. 242 pp., 154 illus. (104 in color). €34.00

Francesco Solinas, ed., *Ottavio Leoni (1578-1630): Les Portraits de Berlin*, Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2013. ISBN: 978-88-6557-159-0. 303 pp., 239 illus. (215 in color). €50.00

Giovanni Baglione, in writing his biography of Ottavio Leoni (1578–1630), concluded that, at the time in Rome, there was “no prince, princess, gentleman, or lady, as much as private individual, who has not been portrayed by Ottavio.”¹ Leoni’s exceptional drawings have long been praised and admired and have been seen as a distinctive collective portrayal of Roman society in the early seventeenth century. The artist recorded on his sheets the features of the personalities of his city: influential cardinals and aristocrats, attractive ladies, children, artists, and literary figures. Leoni’s work is a unique description of the human topography of Rome, thousands of sheets recording, in accurate detail and with extraordinary psychological acumen, the characters that inhabited papal Rome. Particularly celebrated over the last fifty years was his *Portrait of Caravaggio*, in the Biblioteca Marucelliana, Florence,² which has become the canonical image of the painter, and was even used until recently to represent the artist on the Italian 100,000 lire banknote. While most people are familiar with Leoni’s *Portrait of Caravaggio* as a constantly reproduced image, however, the schol-

arly study of Ottavio Leoni has long languished. Until recently, the most important study was Roberto Longhi’s 1951 article on the artist, which sketched for the first time a general view of Leoni.³

Known as “Padovano,” even though he was born in Rome, Ottavio was throughout his life associated with his Paduan father, Ludovico Leoni, a miniaturist and maker of wax portraits and medals. Ludovico’s almost obsessive attention to detail was no doubt inherited by Ottavio, whose likenesses of the members of Roman society were always precise and often startlingly revealing. Following in the footsteps of sixteenth-century artists such as Hans Holbein and François Clouet, Leoni focused his career mainly on courtly portraiture, developing particular skills in the *trois-crayons* technique, which he started exploring c. 1619. Ottavio was a painter, who created at least two altarpieces, *The Annunciation* (c. 1597–98) and the *Virgin and Child with St. Hyacinth* (c. 1600–2) in the Roman churches of Sant’Eustachio and S. Maria sopra Minerva. He also produced several painted portraits of cardinals and aristocrats. Even though the study of Leoni’s paintings has developed significantly over the last ten years and new attributions to the painter are made with a certain frequency, it has to be said that his canvases are invariably inadequate in quality. Both altarpieces by Ottavio are stiff and disappointing, and several of his known portraits (e.g., those of *Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini* at the Villa Aldobrandini, Frascati, or *Donna Vittoria degli*

Annibaldi della Molara [the so-called *Lady of the Scorpions*], *Cardinal Scipione Borghese*, and *Cardinal Francesco Barberini* in private collections)⁴ are rigid, doll-like, and substandard compared to the sophisticated portraits by painters of the previous generation, such as Scipione Pulzone and Jacopo Zucchi.

Had Leoni limited his career to painting, he would now be considered a mediocre artist. However, as a draftsman he was astonishing. His drawings possess all the complexity, refinement, and exquisiteness that his paintings lack. It seems clear that when drawings and paintings of the same sitters by Leoni are compared, an awful lot was lost in translation. Especially in his colored chalk drawings, Ottavio reached levels worthy of a painter in his use of both *disegno* and *colore*. It is thus surprising that so many of the recent studies on Leoni attempt to promote him as an exceptional painter, instead of yielding to his shortcomings and focusing on his undeniable genius as a draftsman.

The first monograph dedicated entirely to Leoni, by Bernardina Sani, was published in Italy as recently as ten years ago.⁵ Accompanied by 158 images in black and white, Sani's book remains the only general study of Leoni's art, dealing with his paintings, drawings, and prints. The volume is, however, far from exhaustive and provides only a general overview, mainly trying to position him within the context of the artistic achievements of his Italian and European contemporaries. In 2010, a small exhibition at the Palazzo Gallavresi in Caravaggio was the first (and so far the only) show to focus on Leoni's work, including paintings and about sixteen drawings.⁶ The exhibition, however, was misguidedly entitled *Caravaggio: Mecenati e pittori*, trying to shift attention to the infamous painter, instead of acknowledging directly Leoni's centrality to the project. Yet the accompanying catalogue remains an important contribution to Leoni's studies.

Two detailed volumes on Leoni have since been published, one by Piera Giovanna Tordella, the other edited by Francesco Solinas. Tordella's book initially appears to be a general study on Leoni, with a monographic approach and an ambitious view. It is only by reading in between the lines, and only after reaching the second part of the book, that it is clear that this volume started as the catalogue of the hundred drawings by Leoni at the Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere "La Colombaria," Florence. The first hundred pages of the book are "*un percorso critico tra lettura stilistica e analisi tecnica*" ("a critical journey between stylistic reading and technical analysis"), focusing on Leoni's portraits and drawings. It is often, not to say mostly, challenging to follow what Tordella is trying to say and the reader is left to puzzle over tortuous sentences. For example, the author pays particular attention to Ottavio's "*interessantissima struttura e stratigrafia genetica, in un divenire incessante di incontri casuali, di punti di stazione meditati, di volti che restituiscono storie, macrostorie e metastorie o che semplicemente non giungono a emergere dal l'anonimato*" (p. 3: "most interesting genetic structure and stratigraphy, in a ceaseless becoming of casual encounters, of med-

Figure 1

OTTAVIO LEONI
Portrait of
Cardinal Ludovico
Ludovisi

Florence, Accademia
Toscana di Scienze
e Lettere "La
Colombaria"



itated points of station, of features that return stories, macrostories and metastories or that simply do not manage to emerge from anonymity”). Tordella’s main goal seems to be to prove Leoni’s “*incidenze protobarocche*” (“proto-Baroque incidences”), and in particular to link him stylistically with Bernini, Van Dyck, and Velázquez. Already in two previous articles she had drawn interesting parallels between Leoni and Van Dyck,⁷ but here the dense language and the frequent tangents make her—ostensibly—sophisticated argument hard to follow. The lengthy text about the critical reception and study of Leoni barely disguises itself as an excuse to attempt a general monograph on the artist, which has relatively little new to say on the subject. The general introduction is followed by a “*stratigrafia mecenatistica*” (“stratigraphy of patronage”), where the author lists and provides information (mainly biographical) on many of the families who commissioned portraits or works by Leoni: the Montalto, Cesi, Medici, de Béthune, Borghese, Aldobrandini, Altemps, Colonna, Ludovisi, and Savoia.

It is only the second part of the book (pp. 105–62) that deals with the specific group of drawings that prompted the publication. These are the hundred drawings from the library of Alessandro Rivani (1746–1832), which were donated in 1836 to the academy in Florence, where they are still preserved. The group is composed of sixty-seven male portraits, twenty-six female ones, and seven images of children. These include portraits of popes, cardinals, bishops, aristocrats, military figures, literati and poets, painters and musicians. Tordella provides entries for each drawing, with basic tombstone material and a color image for each sheet. This is important, considering that more than half the drawings (fifty-two of them) were previously unpublished. Leoni’s drawings at “La Colombaria” are distinguished by their uncommonly fine condition, and it is a pleasure to leaf through the catalogue and admire the illustrations. It would have been useful, however, to have had larger images of the drawings, which are mostly reproduced four per page. It is also disappointing that apart from the most basic informa-



Figure 2

OTTAVIO LEONI
Portrait of Olimpia
Aldobrandini
Florence, *Accademia
Toscana di Scienze
e Lettere “La
Colombaria”*

tion the drawings are not catalogued individually. The author preferred to discuss the works collectively in a section (pp. 109–44) entitled “*Volti e storie*” (“Faces and stories”), in which some significant information on the sitters is part of a wider essay on the drawings, making it often difficult to locate the specific material on an individual sheet. Ottavio’s drawings at “La Colombaria” include portraits of noteworthy Roman patrons—those important for Leoni himself, but also for other artists—such as, for example, Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi (Nos. 28 and 84; e.g., Fig. 1)⁸ and Paolo Giordano II Orsini (No. 61). The female portraits also depict prominent figures in Rome, such as the ill-famed Olimpia Maidalchini Pamphilj (No. 79), also portrayed in the celebrated bust by Alessandro Algardi at the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, and Olimpia Aldobrandini (No. 53; Fig. 2),⁹ who was Cardinal Pietro’s sister and Pope Clement VIII’s niece—particularly notable as this is the only known image of her. Many drawings by Leoni are



Figure 3
 OTTAVIO LEONI
 Portrait of a
 Gentleman
 Florence, *Accademia
 Toscana di Scienze
 e Lettere "La
 Colombaria"*

accompanied by contemporary inscriptions identifying the sitters and allowing us to give a face to many individuals whose features had so far been “blank.” Of the hundred drawings at “La Colombaria,” only fourteen remain unidentified (e.g., No. 62; Fig. 3),¹⁰ and it is hoped that future studies will be able to determine who these sitters might be. Not everyone depicted by Leoni was an aristocrat or an intellectual. It is charming to see that among the faces worthy of being recorded for posterity, Ottavio chose to portray Anna, a “*coper-tara*” (a blanket maker/seller). Other drawings by Leoni in other collections also depict similarly humble sitters, such as Margherita “*orzarola*” (bar-

ley vendor), Giulia “*cappellara*” (milliner), and Angela “*calzettara*” (sock vendor), in Berlin, Cambridge, and Stanford, respectively.¹¹ Tordella’s catalogue, notwithstanding its somewhat frustrating language and structure, includes valuable tools. She discusses in detail Leoni’s use of prepared blue paper and its degradation over time (pp. 95–102) and examines the watermarks visible in the sheets in Florence (pp. 163–65). Another useful part of this volume is the list of all dated drawings by Leoni, in chronological order (pp. 169–78).

The second catalogue, this one of Leoni’s drawings at the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, edited by Francesco Solinas, also includes precious information on technique, paper, and watermarks. Georg Josef Dietz and Stefan Röhrs analyze in detail the Berlin sheets (pp. 273–88), and the essay by Dagmar Korbacher (pp. 41–53) in the same volume also adds important material. The combined technical analysis provided in the Florence and Berlin catalogues is the first significant contribution in this field of Leoni’s studies. Solinas’s volume on the Berlin drawings should be held as a model for future similar enterprises. It focuses on the eighty-nine drawings by Leoni in the Kupferstichkabinett—fifty-nine of male and thirty of female sitters. The drawings in Berlin are not as beautifully preserved as those at “La Colombaria,” but they have the virtue of covering a much broader span of Ottavio’s career. They range from some of Leoni’s earliest drawings (from the late 1590s)—including one of his earliest self-portraits (No. 7; back cover)¹²—to some of his last sheets (from 1629). The group had belonged to Bartolomeo Cavaceppi (1717–1799) and then to Vincenzo Pacetti (1746–1820) in Rome, and the catalogue examines the drawings’ provenance and their passage from Leoni’s workshop to those of the eighteenth-century sculptors/restorers.

Francesco Solinas’s essay introducing the volume (pp. 7–39) is the most complete, forthright, and up-to-date text on Leoni. For anyone wanting a general introduction on the artist, this would be the place to start. Prominence is given to the paintings, and Solinas makes a number of new and interesting attributions to Ottavio. Most fascinat-

ing of all is the small copper showing a procession with a cardinal, which was recently donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹³ While the attribution to Leoni seems likely, it has so far proved impossible to identify the cardinal portrayed or the location and event represented, notwithstanding numerous attempts by scholars in the field. The puzzle provided by this handsome copper remains to be solved.

The catalogue of the Berlin drawings itself was compiled by Yuri Primarosa, who recently completed his PhD dissertation on Leoni at the University of Rome. Primarosa's work on Leoni has been exemplary, and almost all the new material on the artist and the network of patrons for whom he worked has been published by him. In 2013, he wrote an excellent article in which he summarized the personalities and interests of Stalilio and Faustina Pacifici, who had commissioned one of Leoni's altarpieces (at Sant'Eustachio) and who were portrayed on several occasions by the artist.¹⁴ One of the three drawn portraits of Faustina Calora Pacifici is in Berlin (No. 18; Fig. 4).¹⁵ With a blend of impeccable archival research combined with an astute eye, this young art historian is shedding new light on the social network around Leoni and is contributing to the field in other noteworthy ways. An article on Leoni's portraits of Cardinal Erminio Valenti recently appeared, and another, on a copper painted by Leoni for Cardinal Del Monte, is forthcoming.¹⁶ In the Berlin catalogue, Primarosa published an essay about Leoni's portraits of cardinals during the Borghese pontificate (pp. 55–71), providing new material on the relationship between Ottavio's drawings and printmaking. The catalogue itself is impeccable. Primarosa catalogued all eighty-nine drawings—forty-seven of which are unpublished—and for each entry he provided full information about the sitter's identity and his or her relationship to Leoni. Each drawing is also related more generally to Leoni's work and to drawings in other institutions. A complete discussion is also provided for drawings of anonymous sitters (e.g., No. 60; Fig. 5).¹⁷ Full-page color images of each sheet and a generous number of comparative



images make the Berlin drawings fully accessible to a broad audience.

Both catalogues of Leoni drawings are substantial accomplishments and fundamental instruments for our knowledge of the artist, and are welcome additions to the study of seventeenth-century Italian drawings. Other large groups of Leoni drawings exist in Florence (at the Biblioteca Marucelliana), in Vienna (at the Albertina), in Paris (at the Louvre), in Genoa (at the Musei di Strada Nuova, Palazzo Rosso), in the United Kingdom (at the Scottish National Gallery, the Fitzwilliam Museum, and the Ashmolean Museum), and in the United States (at the

Figure 4

OTTAVIO LEONI
Portrait of Faustina
Calora Pacifici
Berlin,
Kupferstichkabinett



Figure 5
 OTTAVIO LEONI
 Portrait of a
 Gentleman
 Berlin,
 Kupferstichkabinett

Metropolitan Museum and the Morgan Library & Museum). It is to be hoped that the volumes by Tordella and Solinas will provide the impetus for other collections to undertake the accurate cataloguing of their holdings of Leoni drawings.

Xavier F. Salomon is Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator at the Frick Collection, New York.

NOTES

1. See Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti dal Pontificato di Gregorio XIII fino a tutto quello d'Urbano VIII*, ed. by Jacob Hess and Herwarth Röttgen, Rome, 1995, p. 321 [vol. 1, p. 223 of the original]: "Non vi è Principe, Principessa, Gentiluomo, e Gentildonna, come anche persona privata, che da Ottavio stata ritratta non sia."

2. Inv. no. DIS, vol. H, fol. 4r. Colored chalks on faded blue paper; 235 x 165 mm; see Maria Cristina Terzaghi, ed., *Caravaggio: Meccenati e pittori*, exh. cat., Caravaggio, Palazzo Gallavresi, 2010, no. 16, repr. (in color); and www.mari.firenze.sbn.it/LEONI/index.
3. See Roberto Longhi, "Volte della Roma caravaggesca," *Paragone: Arte*, 2, no. 21, 1951, pp. 35–39.
4. See Solinas (ed.) 2013, pp. 17–18, 20, 24, 27, and 33.
5. See Bernardina Sani, *Ottavio Leoni: La fatica virtuosa*, Turin, 2005.
6. See Caravaggio 2010.
7. See Piera Giovanna Tordella, "Un ritratto Genovese di Van Dyck e due disegni di Ottavio Leoni: Filippo Spinola, conte palatino di Tassarolo," *Storia dell'Arte*, n.s., 32, 132, 2012, pp. 46–56; and eadem, "Ottavio Leoni secondo Van Dyck: Sul punto di stazione retrostante e l'Autoritratto con girasole," *Rivista d'Arte*, ser. 5, 2, 2012, pp. 297–312.
8. Inv. no. 730. Red, black, and white chalks on blue paper; 238 x 165 mm.
9. Inv. no. 757. Black, red, and white chalks on blue paper; 231 x 162 mm.
10. Inv. no. 764. Colored chalks on blue paper; 230 x 160 mm.
11. See, respectively, Tordella 2011, nos. 26 (inv. no. 723; 234 x 162 mm); and Solinas (ed.) 2013, nos. 28 (KdZ 17118; 204 x 146 mm), pp. 138 and 162 (inv. no. 1671 B), and p. 136.
12. KdZ 17144. Black, white, and ocher chalks on blue paper; 214 x 149 mm. PHOTO: ©bpk/Kupferstichkabinett, SMB/Volker-H. Schneider/Art Resource.
13. Inv. no. 2012.5+3 (Gift of Damon Mezzacappa; oil on copper; 39.4 x 37.5 cm); see Solinas (ed.) 2013, pp. 23–24, 37, n. 56, fig. 15 (color); and www.metmuseum.org/collection.
14. See Yuri Primarosa, "Statilio e Faustina Pacifici committenti e collezionisti di Ottavio Leoni," in Francesca Parrilla, ed., *Collezioni romane dal Quattrocento al Settecento: Protagonisti e comprimari*, Rome, 2013, pp. 31–47.
15. KdZ 17120. Black and white chalks on faded blue paper; 216 x 155 mm. PHOTO: ©bpk/ Kupferstichkabinett, SMB/Art Resource.
16. See Yuri Primarosa, "Fermare il modello in posa con la matita, il bulino, il pennello: Il cardinal Erminio Valenti nei ritratti di Ottavio Leoni," *Bollettino della Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria*, 111, 2014, pp. 963–79; and idem, "Christo in terra con l'adultera figure piccole: Un rame ritrovato di Ottavio Leoni per il cardinal Del Monte" (forthcoming).
17. KdZ 17155. Black and white chalks on blue paper, now faded to beige; 218 x 149 mm. PHOTO: ©bpk/ Kupferstichkabinett, SMB/Volker-H. Schneider/Art Resource.