

BOOK REVIEW

Bert W. Meijer, *Il disegno veneziano 1580–1650: ricostruzioni storico-artistiche*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2017. 596 pp. €120. ISBN: 978-88-222-6503-6 (hb).

Although the systematic study of Venetian drawing of the late sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century was initiated about ninety years ago, it remains incomplete. Certainly, much more is to be accomplished compared with the available research on Florence, Roman or Bolognese drawing of the same period. This shortfall accounts for a great deal given the widely held opinion – advocated in 1568 by the Florentine biographer Giorgio Vasari – that Venetian artists were born rather as painters and fine colourists than as draughtsmen, and so they scarcely worked on paper but from the outset used the canvas as their artistic medium. Fundamental research on Venetian drawing from the early Renaissance to later periods by Detlev von Halden, Hans and Erica Tietze-Conrat, Michelangelo Muraro, Nicola Ivanoff and Terisio Pignatti has refuted this viewpoint. Finally, recent exhibitions of the three giants of Venetian painting – Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese – their workshops and wider artistic context have accompanied or kick-started new studies of draughtsmanship conducted, for example, by scholars like Bernard Aikema, Sergio Martinelli, Stefania Mason, Andrea Piai, W.R. Rearick, David Rosand, Paola Rossi, Ugo Ruggeri, Catherine Whistler and Bert W. Meijer. The author of the publication under review has set himself the taxing goal to publish a corpus of the work of draughtsmen who were without exception also painters in Venice and beyond during the period 1580/90–1640/50. He can draw on a wealth of his own publications on the subject (the first and most recent of his articles is listed in an extensive bibliography concerning Paolo Fiammingo and is dated 1975, and respectively 2017).

The reading of the individual catalogue entries is fascinating and full of surprises. In specific cases the discussed drawings or sketches may turn out to be – resulting from the artist's study of antique sculptures, plaster casts or life models – body parts, stages of postures, drapery studies, countenances, thus specific details or overall designs of large compositions of religious or history paintings, as highlighted for instance in works by Francesco Maffei. A large number of the decorations of the artists assessed are situated in churches, palaces and historic monuments not only in Venice and the Veneto but also beyond, in remote places both in northern Lombardy and in Slovenia or Croatia. In other words, numerous drawings also bear testimony to the far-reaching scope of activities of Venetian artists at this time and the network of connections with their clients, collectors or dealers and hence also illustrate the ramified genesis of many works.

This catalogue of Venetian drawings of the late Renaissance and early Baroque period includes almost four hundred carefully researched and well-illustrated works on paper (among them a few oil sketches) of about forty artists, and respectively their workshops, many of which are new attributions, reattributions or hereto unpublished discoveries. A few leading artists who had set up family enterprises with a large graphic production, such as Giovanni Battista Maganza (I Maganza) or Paolo Veronese (I Caliani) are understandably presented summarily with only a selection of drawings, as well as Palma Giovane who has left behind hundreds of drawings (of which only a part has been catalogued to date). For the same reason, Jacopo Bassano, or respectively his workshop, including his son Leandro and also Domenico Tintoretto, Jacopo's son, who was a gifted draughtsman too, as well as Bernardo Strozzi who lived only at the end of his life in Venice, have been discussed peripherally.

The many assembled drawings allow some interesting stylistic conclusions: the versatility of their linear or gestural handwriting is striking and, what is more, their multifaceted way of artistic expression and used techniques is staggering. In comparing the catalogued works with drawings of artists active in Milano, Bologna, Florence or Rome it is now possible to trace some typical differences, respectively to designate specific features of drawing styles in Venice: for example, a penchant for open forms, the discontinuity of the outlines and last but not least dashed lines. Corresponding examples by Francesco Maffei, Pietro Malombra or Santo Peranda make this evident. From this perspective, it is understandable that this idiosyncrasy has prompted the Roman theorist and biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori to complain of a lack of 'grace in the contour' in the works of the Venetian artists. Indeed, an almost permanent unrest can be detected in the drawing process, the lines are often undulating, meandering or suddenly interrupted, frequently hatched, and the ductus seems sometimes choppy. The drawing technique can (as a consequence of the use of brown washes or white chalk) occasionally provoke a stunning flaming or blazing appeal and thus lead to a dramatic chiaroscuro effect, as examples of Francesco Ruschi and Adnrea Michielim – known as il Vicentino – demonstrate.

Especially Leonardo Corona tends towards an eclectic use of the above-quoted forms of style. The seventeen of his catalogued drawings attest on the one hand to his indebtedness to the great Venetian Renaissance painters and on the other hand to a passion for new experiments: this makes evident his series of playing putti drafted fluently on small pieces of paper. How challenging it was for Meijer to catalogue Corona's works becomes apparent, too, from the fact that of the eighteen drawings attributed to him by Tietze-Conrat in 1944, Meijer only retains six. Antonio Vassilacchi known as l'Aliense, who had Greek roots, created a versatile but very consistent painterly work that would not allow the assumption that his many drawings are stylistically so diverse, ranging from academic studies to spontaneous drafts of group compositions to accomplished designs, both for various religious paintings and for a sculptural project in San Giorgio Maggiore (realised by Girolamo Campagna). Virtually breathtaking are the unorthodox drawings by Matteo Ingoli. His well-organised projects for vertiginous ceiling frescos or altar paintings often depict claustrophobic gatherings of hovering or plunging angels, thus creating typical *horror vacui*-effects. Francesco Maffei of

whom Meijer lists thirty-one drawings (among them numerous new attributions previously linked to Bassano, Tintoretto, Veronese or to northern masters) permanently reinvented himself to regularly take up old or to introduce new trends of expression. Among his most dazzling drawings are his male nudes revealing his gift to infuse life and drama in human bodies.

Carlo Ridolfi, a painter and biographer who in 1648 published the famous lives of the Venetian artists, *Le maraviglie dell'arte...* (*The Marvels of Art*), was justifiably familiar with the cultural situation in his home town. His drawings, often symmetrical compositions, executed in a meticulous outline technique, include designs for altar paintings and cover-pages. The catalogue also lists thirty-six drawings by il Vicentino: compared to the countless drawings by Palma Giovane whom he admired, this number of works might appear modest. All the more perplexing is the stylistic versatility and inventiveness of il Vicentino. Several examples (relating to glorious history paintings in the Doge's Palace or altar-pieces in or outside Venice) poignantly illustrate his ability to unite large numbers of figures to animated and entangled groups. Other works on paper instead reveal the artist's preference for capturing encounters of only a few figures and lending action and emotion to them in brilliantly using washes and applying a wide range of shadows.

Meijer laments that, upon his death in 1618, Pietro Malombra had left approximately two thousand drawings and that he was only able to trace forty of them (nevertheless, the most extensive number of works for an individual artist in the publication!). Malombra's case is representative for many other artists discussed. Especially in this respect the publication is unparalleled and full of discoveries and therefore deserves special praise. The attention Meijer gives each artist's drawings, the skill he evinced for the substantiation of new attributions, compiling the inventory of works chronologically, the continuous zeal to penetrate to the artist's core and, crucially, to contextualise the works is groundbreaking. The case of Malombra makes this exemplarily evident: Tietze-Conrat attributed thirteen drawings to his hand, of which Meijer only retains six. The analysis of the forty catalogued drawings reveals a number of new elements: of the six drawings catalogued and related to six existing paintings, two are new attributions. Thanks to the comprehensive entries (and the extensive notes) our view of Malombra's work is deepened considerably, especially our knowledge of the artist's conception of the human body and its orchestration within the overall composition. Among his nude studies are real masterworks full of phenomenal agility and sculptural energy, incorporating both traditional Venetian impulses as well as influences of contemporaries like Palma Giovane.