

# Exhibitions

## Drawn from the Antique

Haarlem and London

by CLARE HORNSBY

IN MILAN CATHEDRAL, in front of one of the piers supporting the vault of the right transept, there appears an extraordinary sculpture of a flayed St Bartholomew. Its identity as a religious icon is compromised by its form – a marble statue of a male nude – and by its caption proclaiming the sculptor's proud association with and study of the classical canon of sculpture: 'Non me Praxiteles sed Marco finxit Agrat' ('I was not sculpted by Praxiteles but by Marco d'Agrate'). D'Agrate's *St Bartholomew* of 1562 is made in clear imitation of the classical iconography of Hercules; the skin of the Nemean Lion, here the martyr's skin, is thrown like a stole across the shoulders.

In the Renaissance and beyond, conscious connection with the antique past was a way of arrogating to the artist the authority of the canon. In his accomplished essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Drawn from the Antique: Artists & the Classical Ideal*, first shown at the Teylers Museum, Haarlem, and seen by this reviewer at **Sir John Soane's Museum, London** (closed 26th September), Adriano Aymonino, the co-curator of the show, looks at the practice of drawing from the Antique and the theory that developed alongside it.<sup>1</sup> Aymonino examines the philosophical and didactic principles behind the canon of classical art from its origins with Polycleitus, through the Renaissance to the eighteenth-century academies. He makes reference to the parallel practice, equally essential to an artist's education, of studying and copying the 'modern' masters, particularly the works of Raphael.

It is this classical education, rather than the more commonly exhibited results of it, that was the subject of the exhibition. There were, however, several exceptions to this rule, a highlight being the magnificent Goltzius red-chalk drawing of the *Belvedere torso* of 1581 from the Teylers Museum, Haarlem (no.8). The thirty-five works on show were images of artists undertaking the task that was at the centre of their daily work. Most were drawings and prints from the Katrin Bellinger collection, with a few paintings and artists' books, augmented by some finely chosen loans. The exhibition looked at the Antique from an unusual perspective: not that of the antiquarian or collector but of the artists themselves using antique sculpture as a means of learning how to draw, which would then help them to paint and sculpt correctly. This was their daily grind, a practice that underpinned their future work.

From its first image, an engraving of 1531 showing Baccio Bandinelli with his pupils drawing figurines and jars by candlelight, to the last – a *Self-portrait as image seller* by William Daniels from 1850, bearing a tray with figurines and busts on his head – the exhibition covered the period in which the canon of classical art held sway. The training of artists, both in their private practice and in the theoretical foundations of the national and independent academies that nurtured them, was anchored in this tradition. The trajectory of the canon through rediscovery, rise, dominance and ultimate failure is traced in the catalogue in the essay by Aymonino. Its proponents were theorists (Dolce, Armenini), historians (Vasari, Bellori) and the artists who created the modern classical canon (Raphael, Michelangelo). The influence of the Antique in Italy on visiting artists from the Netherlands, Rubens being the most notable, was the theme of the first room in the show. The consistent presence of artists from the north in Rome and the constant transfer of ideas northwards through artists' books was well articulated in the choice of works. The visual narrative then continued with the flourishing of the academic tradition in England and elsewhere.



42. *The artist seated at a table, drawing a bust of a woman*, by Hubert Robert. c.1763–65. Red chalk, 33.3 by 44.1 cm. (Katrin Bellinger collection; exh. Sir John Soane's Museum, London).

The age before such theoretical underpinnings were fully established was well represented in the exhibition with images that show artists in their private practice, driven to study the Antique by a strong desire for self-improvement. The best known among these images is Federico Zuccaro's 1595 drawing of his (by then deceased) brother Taddeo as a young and eager student of the arts sketching in the Belvedere courtyard the statues of *Apollo* and *Laocoön* at either side of him (no.5; Fig.41). This imaginary view is one of a series of twenty drawings in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, which, taken together and understood within their context as sketches for decorations inside Rome's Palazzo Zuccari, reveal a mythologising narrative of the struggling young artist overcoming all odds on the path to success, a compelling visual *Bildungsroman*; the Palazzo Zuccari was intended by Federico to be a private academy for artists, its decorative scheme inspiring and instructing those who came to study there.<sup>2</sup>

When Hubert Robert was a student at the Académie de France in Rome in the mid-1750s, theory had been transformed into rule and many of the images in the show illustrated the pan-European nature of the academy as an institution based on codification, didacticism and, ultimately, standardisation. But Robert's



41. *Taddeo in the Belvedere Court in the Vatican drawing the Laocoön*, by Federico Zuccaro. c.1595. Pen and brown ink, brush with brown wash, over black chalk and touches of red chalk, 17.5 by 42.5 cm. (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; exh. Sir John Soane's Museum, London).





43. *The courtyard of the Farnese Palace in Rome, with the Farnese Hercules*, by Louis Chays. 1775. Pen and brown ink, brown wash, pencil and white gouache, 43.4 by 53.4 cm. (Kunstbibliothek, Berlin; exh. Sir John Soane's Museum, London).

The artist seated at a table, drawing the bust of a woman (no.17; Fig.42) has that same sense of freshness and informality of engagement with the Antique as the Zuccaro of over 150 years earlier. Robert shows himself drawing a bust of the Empress Faustina while an earlier drawing on the wall of her husband, Marcus Aurelius, presides over his work. The three-way glance between the participants lightens the studiousness of the scene; humour and personality enter the studio space and the artist is shown casually dressed, working for his own pleasure and in his own time.

However, in the history of drawing from the Antique and in the exhibition itself, it was the academic tradition that dominated. Charles-Joseph Natoire, who is quoted in the valuable catalogue section containing primary sources, was a director of the Académie de France and he established there the practice of first drawing from life and then concluding by 'correcting' those drawings by reference to casts of antique sculpture. Included in the exhibition was his view of a life class at the Paris Académie with models posing as the *Wrestlers* (no.16), an eloquent narrative of the codified curriculum. Aymonino describes it as a 'visual manifesto in favour of a "retour à l'ordre" within the académie', a reaction against excesses of the 'petite manière' of Watteau and back to what C.N. Cochin called the 'bon goût du siècle précédent'. Figures posing as sculpture was a traditional practice in artists' training, which was beautifully illustrated in the exhibition by a stunning Rubens drawing of a boy posing as the *Spinario* (no.9) and a Turner drawing of two men, also posed as the *Wrestlers* (no.27b).

Natoire's image was juxtaposed with a visual statement of the theory behind classical art education; a print of 1702 by Nicolas Dorigny after a Maratti drawing. The Three Graces (in homage to Raphael at the Farnesina) are presiding deities watching over artists studying geometry, anatomy and the Antique. The inscriptions on the print note that the last of these is always essential, but that without inspiration every effort is in vain ('*ogni fatica è vana*'). The repeated references to Raphael in this image, particularly to the *School of Athens*, point to the 'other half' of an artist's training: copying the masters by working from paintings in galleries, palaces and collections such as the Capitoline picture gallery. That particular collection was made public with an enlightened aim: 'to support the practice and advancement of young students of the Liberal Arts', as stated by Pope Clement XII when opening the museum in 1734.

Artists copied all that was available to them, frequenting collections where antiquities and modern masters existed side by side. Thomas Jones (1742–1803) gives us a glimpse in his Roman diary: '2nd February 1778 Went with Smith the Landscape Painter & Hardwick to see a Picture of Perseus & Andromache which the Cavaliere Mengs had just finished for Sir Watkin William Wynne & which was now exhibiting to the Public at his Palace near St Peter's – [ . . . ] All the Grand Apartments of the palace [were] thrown open – in most of which were groupes of Pupils making Studies after drawings pictures or Statues, according to their respective Classes'.<sup>3</sup>

As well as ad hoc affairs such as those described by Jones, the Roman princely col-

lections were vital to training, as one recent study of the Carracci gallery in the Palazzo Farnese shows,<sup>4</sup> emphasising the importance of that palace as a naturally evolving artists' academy. Just as the Carracci gallery paintings quoted freely from the sculptures in the family collection on display in the courtyard, later generations of artists benefited from copying the paintings and the sculptures together in the same location.

Illustrating this was the wonderful drawing by Louis Chays (no.21; Fig.43), a minor figure who followed Hubert Robert, showing the Farnese courtyard with the *Hercules*. The artist in the foreground who is sketching the statue from behind – the favoured view – is semi-nude in the antique fashion, as is the statue itself. As he bends over his drawing panel, his back is revealed as heavily muscular, in conscious imitation of the statue, as if he himself, through study, is becoming semi-divine. Meanwhile, in the mid- and background of the drawing, tourists and other artists are depicted in contemporary dress admiring the statues. A point is being made here about the significance of proximity in the encounter between artist and sculpture. Hubert Robert often mixed classical and contemporary costume in his drawings of artists sketching in the Capitoline museum, indicating that in such places historical time is suspended. The notion of the 'artist-as-philosopher' meditating on the drama of the Antique, on its perfection and its beauty, is proposed as the highest aim of the practice of drawing its remains. This spirit is epitomised in the famous Fuseli image of *The artist moved by the grandeur of antique fragments* (no.22), in which a canon not of form but of emotion is proposed as the means to articulate an adequate response to the past.

There were many other treasures which deserve mention in this fascinating and intelligent exhibition. The show, when paired with the beautifully produced catalogue, provided the visitor with a focused insight into the classical tradition of artists' training. The importance of the work undertaken by Adriano Aymonino, Anne Varick Lauder and all those who participated in both these enterprises should not be underestimated.

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue: *Drawn from the Antique: Artists and the Classical Ideal*. By Adriano Aymonino and Anne Varick Lauder et al. 256 pp. incl. 206 col. + 76 b. & w. ills. (Sir John Soane's Museum, London, 2015), £25. ISBN 978-0-9573398-9-7.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Brooks: exh. cat. *Taddeo and Federico Zuccaro: artist-brothers in Renaissance Rome*, Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum) 2007–08. Several drawings in this album reflect the importance of copying, both from the Antique and from modern masters, such as *Taddeo in the Sistine Chapel drawing Michelangelo's Last Judgment* (no.18).

<sup>3</sup> *The memoirs of Thomas Jones, Pencerrig*, transcribed from National Library of Wales MS 23812D; see [https://www.llgc.org.uk/pencerrig/thjones\\_s\\_001.htm](https://www.llgc.org.uk/pencerrig/thjones_s_001.htm) (retrieved 27/7/2015).

<sup>4</sup> R. Gallego: 'De los Carracci a Sebastiano Conca: la Sala Grande del palacio Farnese como espacio para la formación de los artistas en ciernes', *Acta/Artis. Estudios d'Art Modern* 2 (2014), pp.25–49.