

EXHIBITS

Fra Bartolommeo and the Renaissance Ideal

The High Renaissance (c.1500-20), with its universal message of Classical beauty, is not chic in academia. British medievalist John Ruskin, so influential in the U.S., nurtured a fruity appreciation for the art of Florence of the mid-fifteenth century, especially works (falsely) seen as “primitive.” Ruskin, who trained British imperialists for their abominations in Africa, no doubt found the cult of

“primitivism” a useful weapon against any notion that a higher culture based on human creativity could become universal. He purveyed the prejudice that artists like Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), and above all Michelangelo (1475-1564) and Raphael (1483-1520), were *overdeveloped*; that their vision of humanity reflected an unattainable, even undesirable ideal. Thus today, the fourth most gifted master of

the Central Italian High Renaissance, Fra Bartolommeo (1472-1517), is almost unknown.

The exhibit, “Fra Bartolommeo: Master Draughtsman of the High Renaissance,” at New York’s Pierpont Morgan Library Sept. 11-Nov. 29, will help to remedy this oversight, especially as the Morgan’s curators have flanked it with a display featuring original manuscripts, letters, and other treasures highlighting the major personalities of the era in which Fra Bartolommeo worked.

Like Raphael and Leonardo, Fra Bartolommeo was a Platonic artist, who grounded his art on constant observation of nature, but perfected this raw material in compositions which surpass natural beauty, by applying perspective (projective geometry), anatomy, and *chiaroscuro*, or relief—an ideal which expresses the notion that man is the living image of the Creator God.

This show, which concludes its four-city tour in New York after Rotterdam, Boston, and Fort Worth, focuses on the Rotterdam Albums, two books of drawings by Fra Bartolommeo compiled by a Florentine collector, Gabburri, in the 1700’s, which have remarkably survived as a set. The drawings had become so fragile as to be inaccessible even to scholars, until a major conservation project began in 1982. After Nov. 29, they will be retired from public view for a long time at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam.

Most of the drawings exhibited, including composition sketches and detailed studies of hands, faces, and draperies, especially in black, white, and red chalks, were made to prepare his many altarpieces and frescoes. It is stunning to see how he transformed boy models into Madonnas; or how a strong-featured fellow friar is gradu-



Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam

Fra Bartolommeo, “Composition Drawing for ‘St. George and the Dragon.’”



Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam

Fra Bartolommeo, "Study for the Christ Child."

ally idealized to become God the Father.

Religious Upsurge

Fra Bartolommeo's work reminds us that what most set apart the High Renaissance from the preceding quarter-century was a religious revival which, although tied in Florence to the fanatical Dominican monk Savonarola, cannot be reduced to Savonarola alone. Although rooted in the Platonic movement, many people were fed up with a strain of Neoplatonic paganism being elevated above Christianity—a tendency which heavily influenced the circles of Lorenzo de' Medici's Platonic Academy at this time.

The period was replete with ironies. While Savonarola's foes included Medici partisans hoping to oust his theocracy and return to power, it was a Medici Pope—Lorenzo the Magnificent's son Leo X—who later, in 1515, approved a review of the evidence used to convict Savonarola of heresy. Moreover, it was the new Florentine Republic inherited from Savonarola, which the statesman Niccolò

Machiavelli and the titans Leonardo and Michelangelo chose to serve with brilliance and devotion in the years 1503-06—when Leonardo reached the zenith of his creative powers in nearly every field of his scientific and artistic endeavor.

Fra Bartolommeo, born Baccio della Porta, was the artist most touched by events in Florence in the 1490's. Like many others, including members of the Platonic Academy and reputedly even Lorenzo de' Medici, he had been stirred by Savonarola's calls to ren-

pent. He burned some of his nude drawings on the "bonfires of the vanities" organized by Savonarola's disciples, the Piagnoni. After Savonarola's death, the deeply shaken Baccio della Porta took orders as a Dominican friar in 1500, perhaps intending to quit painting. Happily for us, he entered the monastery of St. Mark's in Florence, a center of Platonism and of sublime art since the era of the Council of Florence (1439-41), and was persuaded to resume painting.

An insight into his character is given by the fact that one of his favorite themes was the legendary "Meeting Between Sts. Francis and Dominic," in which the founders of the mendicant orders embraced. Despite the rivalry which existed between Franciscans and Dominicans since both had been founded in the 1200's—sharpened in this era by

doctrinal disputes and embittered by the Franciscan role in Savonarola's trial—Fra Bartolommeo cherished the image of the two saints' higher unity; he would have made it the focus of an altarpiece for St. Mark's, had not less forgiving Dominican brothers refused.

Fra Bartolommeo mastered the advanced concepts of Leonardo's art in Florence around 1503-5, at a level equaled only by Raphael. His drawings in black and white chalk on colored paper, of rearing horses and riders, could easily be taken for Leonardo's. Later in Rome, he absorbed the classical style of Raphael, and of Michelangelo, of whom he made a haunting chalk portrait, which is shown in the exhibit.

Even if you miss the show, I recommend the catalogue by Chris Fischer (\$45 paperbound), where many of the friar's pictures are illustrated, some after recent conservation revealing colors and even figures invisible in older reproductions. One of these, the very damaged fresco of the Last Judgment of c.1499, is undeniably the source of the composition a decade later of Raphael's "Disputation on the Sacrament" among his Vatican *Stanza della Signatura* frescoes; in fact, these most famous frescoes of Raphael are inconceivable without the model designed earlier by Fra Bartolommeo.

—Nora Hamerman



Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam

Fra Bartolommeo, "Study for Sts. Francis and Dominic Embracing."