

Study of an Ink Wash of the Martyrdom of San Lorenzo

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The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, Anonymous,
17th century, ink and ink wash on paper,
Italian

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Figure 1, Ink Wash of the Martyrdom of San Lorenzo

This 17th c. Italian ink wash preparation of the martyrdom of San Lorenzo is characteristically Baroque, which is evident through the content and style of the work, distinguishing it from earlier paintings of the same subject matter. Through the composition and stylistic effects we can presume that it was painted by one of the Carracci's followers during the Baroque period. The Baroque style is characterized by a feeling of energy and tension, with an emphasis on portraying emotion. Especially when compared to Bronzino's very Mannerist *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (San Lorenzo, 1569), it is evident that it is of a different era.

By looking at the ink wash one is able to tell that it is a preparation for an altarpiece due to the religious content. As seen in Figure 1, the ink wash depicts the martyrdom of San Lorenzo, a very common subject in Early Modern European painting. One is able to tell that it is Baroque because of the composition; the painting is set up so that there is limited scope, meaning that there is little distraction in the background. This was typical of Baroque altarpieces because it focused the viewer's attention on the event happening in the foreground making it

easily understandable and convincing in its sense of emotion¹. In the piece there is a strong diagonal emphasis, which was a trademark of the time because it creates a more dynamic composition, which was important to catch the eye of the viewer.

The print is similar to the style of one of the great Baroque painters, Annibale Carracci, who similarly organized his compositions. It was important to Carracci that there be little distractions from the main theme of the painting so he often placed the most important scene in the foreground.² When looking at the ink wash with those facts in mind one is able to see the similar compositions. Like Annibale Carracci's preparatory drawings, whose "pen lines vary little in pressure or width"³, the creator of the wash used similar techniques, as well as relying on highlights to provide accents of modeling and light. Because a follower of the Carracci made it, it is easily assumed to be of the Baroque time period.

It can also be categorized as Baroque when looked at in relation to Bronzino's version of the *Martyrdom*, and it is immediately evident how different the two are stylistically. Though they portray the same scene, the two are represented in extremely different ways. Bronzino's piece is visually confusing and chaotic with abundant action and figures in both the foreground and background. In Bronzino's painting there is an abundance of naked, highly energetic bodies, arranged in festive stances in the lower zone of the fresco.⁴ Many of the figures are nude and have very distinct musculature, which flaunts the form and emphasizes

¹ Waterhouse, 990

² Class notes 1/21/14

³ Serooskerken, 428

⁴ Campbell, 100

the way their bodies are contorted in strange ways. In comparison, the ink wash has a clear focus with much more proportionate and less scantily clad figures.

Though both are clearly illustrating the martyrdom of San Lorenzo, they show different parts of the event. In Bronzino's version, San Lorenzo is already on the grill with what appears to be a nonchalant attitude about the whole affair shown through his limp hand raised in the air and a placid look on his face. In writings of the martyrdom it is said that "the dying martyr [rolled] his eyes toward [the prefect] and [gestured] in his direction, as if to cast an insult"⁵. The prefect was the man who sentenced San Lorenzo to death, and in both paintings is shown on a set of steps dressed as a judge and overlooking the grill.

In Bronzino's masterpiece San Lorenzo is serene, though framed by the mayhem of the animated figures, "as if the sensation of torment has been displaced from his tranquil center"⁶. This is done in order to bring attention to the nude figures as well because the figures were important representatives of both important and more humble people, such as the personification of the River Tiber, the Virtues, or the executioner with the bellows. Bronzino brings such attention to his figures and to the situation so that the viewer would be so overwhelmed with the feel of the piece that they would forget the tragedy and horror of the event.⁷ This somewhat theatrical rendering of a religious event was well thought out and planned. Bronzino was influenced by the theater of the time, which featured farces: plays somewhere between a tragedy and a comedy. This gallows humor is evident

⁵ Gaston, 361

⁶ Campbell 105

⁷ Campbell 107

in how Lorenzo appears to be so nonchalant, which is an allusion to the notorious remark Lorenzo said that his body should be turned so that it may cook on both sides.

In the ink wash San Lorenzo is in the process of being brought to the grill with his hand raised, still preaching the word of God. The different rendering in the ink wash is due to the different beliefs about art in the two different times. When the ink wash was most likely made it was thought that the aim of art was to “move the affections by showing character and emotion”⁸. Because of this Lorenzo isn’t shown flippantly talking to the judge as he is depicted in Bronzino’s painting, but rather standing tall, passionately preaching his beliefs until his death.

By looking at the ink wash of the martyrdom of San Lorenzo both in relation to Bronzino’s earlier rendition of it, and through the eyes of a Carracci follower it is evident that it was made during the Baroque period. Knowing that the ink wash is from the Baroque period is important because it helps the viewer understand why it compositionally and thematically arranged. It also gives the wash relevance and importance, and though we don’t know who made it, it can now be used as a tool to learn more about the period.

⁸ Beyer 361

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