

# The Visual Vocabulary of a New Era: Pontormo’s “Maniera” of the Dynamic Line

Better known as “Pontormo” after his hometown, the painter Jacopo Carucci became one of the leading painters, a lodestar of early 16th-century Florence, where he enjoyed the patronage of the ruling Medici dynasty. After an early apprenticeship under Leonardo da Vinci, Piero di Cosimo, and Andrea del Sarto,

Pontormo went on to establish a new, more expressive and idiosyncratic pictorial language characterized by strongly illuminated, dynamic figures. The young artist’s spirit of invention shone particularly bright in the medium of chalk drawing, where he primarily used black and red chalk for creative experimentation while developing his compositional ideas.

The author of the catalogue raisonné Janet Cox-Rearick has highlighted how Pontormo, in his chalk drawings, “relied to an unusual degree on the simplest and most difficult graphic medium -- the line itself.” As she explains: “There was no attempt to achieve painterly effects, to imitate the language of painting through the use of color or combined media. Pontormo expressed the linearity so uniquely characteristic of Florence in unadulterated form.”

Pontormo was a quite prolific draftsman (Vasari mentions his having left behind “molti disegni, cartoni, e modelli di terra bellissimi” in his studio after his death), yet few works on paper have survived beyond those in the Uffizi collection. This makes it extremely rare to find drawings by this outstanding Mannerist in museums or collections outside Italy. Cox-Rearick first included our particular folio, with its doubled male nude study, in the supplement to her catalogue raisonné of the artist’s drawings as early as in 1994. That same year, she also presented it at a symposium, with her contribution being published in 1996. Following a conclusive appraisal of the original in 1998, she again confirmed her attribution of the present drawing to Pontormo’s own hand. According to her expertise, the decisive factor was a stylistic comparison with three chalk drawings by the artist from the early 1520s that form part of the Uffizi

collections (Inventory No. 6660F recto, 6722F recto, 6702F verso).

The most recent insights were gained when our drawing was exhibited at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt in 2016. Here, curator Bastian Eclercy broke new ground by establishing our sheet’s kinship to the famous red chalk study of three male nudes owned by the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille. This is considered a major early drawing by Pontormo and was often praised in the past for its stylistic qualities (Fig. right). Writing in his catalogue essay for the “Maniera Exhibition” in Frankfurt, Eclercy thus was able to provide the proper context for our present drawing, “which was initially auctioned with an erroneous attribution to Cherubino Alberti but was recognized as a work by Pontormo by Cox-Rearick in 1996.” This said, he found her comparison with the drawings in the Uffizi too vague to allow a more precise dating:

“What seems more significant is the hitherto unnoticed connection with the central figure of the folio in Lille, whose forward stride and tense backward arching of the upper body exactly mirror the lefthand nude study down to the details of the contours. Deviations are found in the head, which is not tilted in the present case, and above all in the right arm, which is raised frontally towards the viewer while the left arm appears to cover the pudenda.

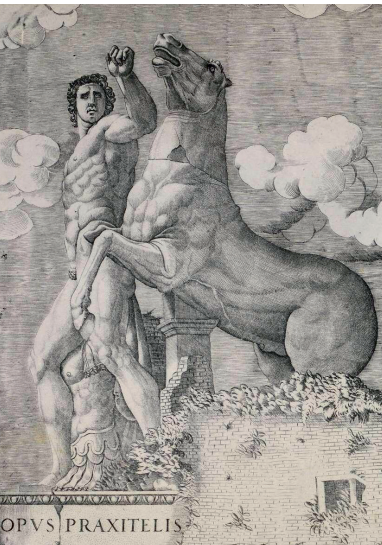
This places the components of the figure’s motion in perfect balance. Viewers should not be disturbed by the fact that the Lille drawing is much more elaborate in terms of its modeling of the bodies, whereas [...] [our] folio is only a sketch study that has been executed on the fly, albeit with supreme confidence, and that hints but fleetingly at the inside forms with a few brief hatchings. If one compares the course and the stroke pattern of the rhythmically sweeping contour lines, however, then the two drawings do indeed evince a close connection; for example, in the formation of the lower legs and feet, in the transition from thigh to buttocks, or in the very similar abbreviations of the facial features. In the present case as well, Pontormo has included an adjacent variant of the figure on the same folio; though hard to read due to its extreme indistinctness, it in any case depicts a standing frontal nude with what seem to be crossed legs. For these reasons, it is likely that [...] [our] drawing was made around 1517 and in close rapport with the study in Lille.

On the other hand, it is also possible that both figures were based on one and the same prominent model: the ancient “Horse Tamers” on the Quirinal Hill in Rome (Fig.). Comparing the study with the sculpture’s rarely depicted side view, one realizes that the pose in Pontormo’s drawing, ostensibly studied from nature, is actually derived from a famous work of antiquity. But it is also unmistakable that the draftsman was only indirectly acquainted with the sculpture (be it through engravings, smaller sculptural versions or his own visual memories), and that he probably had its pose recreated, as it were, by a workshop model. It was this pose which Pontormo then seems to have further elaborated in impressive fashion.” (Bastian Eclercy, in: Exhibition catalogue for “Maniera: Pontormo, Bronzino und das Florenz der Medici.” Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum, 2016. pp. 78-81).

As Philippe Costamagna has noted, “Pontormo’s regular habit of drawing from life influenced the nature of his draftsmanship so profoundly that it is often difficult to distinguish his studies from life from those [...] that sprang from his imagination.” (Philippe Costamagna: “The Formation of Florentine Draftsmanship: Life Studies from Leonardo and Michelangelo to Pontormo and Salviati”, 2005, p. 284). In any case, our folio represents an undeniably intriguing addition to the corpus of Pontormo’s drawings and to our understanding of how he created his works. It expands our knowledge of the artist’s early activity and is a further testament to the boundless creative energy of this remarkable 16th-century draftsman.



Jacopo da Pontormo. Study of three male nudes. Circa 1517. Musée des Beaux-Art, Lille



Unknown engraver. The Horse-Tamers of the Quirinal (detail). 1546. Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel

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