A New Drawing by Louis Dorigny

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During his lifetime, the Frenchman Louis Dorigny (1654–1742) was one of the foremost fresco painters working in the Veneto. The son of the painter Michel Dorigny and the nephew of Simon Vouet, Louis was apprenticed at an early age to Charles Lebrun. At eighteen, the young painter traveled to Rome, where he finished his training before moving north to Venice.

Dorigny stayed for five or six years in the city of lagoons, from 1682 to 1687–88. He established his reputation during this period with the frescoed ceiling in the ballroom of Palazzo Zenobio. In this work, Dorigny's elegant, somewhat "metallic," neo-mannerist figures betray his artistic roots—a mixture of French and Bolognese baroque classicism. From Verona, where he settled in 1688, Dorigny executed over the following decades a series of prestigious commissions for fresco decorations all over the Veneto. It has been remarked that Dorigny's large-scale frescoes for the Venetian families of the Manin (Venice, church of the Scalzi; Udine, Duomo), the Tron (Venice, Palazzo Tron), and the Widmann (Bagnoli di Sopra, Palazzetto Widmann) were a source of inspiration for the young Giambattista Tiepolo.

While much of Dorigny's painted work survives, only a handful of his drawings appears to have come down to us. This is unfortunate, as Dezallier d'Argenville praised the quality of the artist's graphic production, which, according to his testimony, consisted of sheets done in a great variety of techniques. The truth of the latter statement is borne out by the few certain drawings by the artist known today. Among these, there is a large composition sheet done in pen, a series of small, highly finished pen drawings for engravings, a drawing in pen and wash over red chalk for part of a ceiling fresco, two studies of male nudes, done in red chalk and pen (also the technique of the verso of one of the sheets), and a preparatory study for two figures in a fresco, done in red chalk, heightened in white.

To this small corpus may be added an important sheet in the Kupferstich-Kabinett of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. The drawing, measuring 298 by 575 millimeters, is executed in red chalk, with wash (Fig. 1). Its composition corresponds exactly to Dorigny's ceiling fresco in Palazzetto Widmann at Bagnoli di Sopra, which depicts the Chariot of Dawn Chasing away Darkness and can be dated before 1718 (Fig. 2).

The drawing is an autograph study and not a copy. This can be proven by comparing it to a series of fourteen drawings in pen over black chalk, with wash, and heightened in white, representing compositions by Dorigny (Museo del Castelvecchio, Verona). Most of those sheets have an inscription on the verso indicating the location of the related fresco. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the outlines of the figures in these drawings are rendered in a mechanical way, and there is a total disregard for modeling and atmospheric effect (Fig. 3). In this respect, there is a world of difference between this series and the Dresden drawing, with its extremely sensitive handling. No doubt the Verona compositions are ricordi done by a studio assistant.

By contrast, the drawing presented here is a compositional study by the master himself documenting a stage in Dorigny's systematic preparation for a major fresco. A carefully executed red chalk study in the Museo Civico,
Figure 1 Louis Dorigny. The Chariot of Dawn Chasing away Darkness.
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kupferstich-Kabinett.

Figure 2 Louis Dorigny. The Chariot of Dawn Chasing away Darkness.
Bagnoli di Sopra, Palazzetto Widmann.
Padua, for the two winged figures at the far right testifies to a later moment in the genesis of the same work (Fig. 4). The two drawings might indicate that Louis Dorigny introduced in the Veneto not only a Bolognese manner of decorative painting, but perhaps a Central Italian concept of disegno as well.


3. Among the sheets erroneously attributed to Dorigny are three in pen at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, one of which, the Susanna and the Elders, was published in Cento antichi disegni veneziani, exh. cat., G. Fiocco, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 1955, no. 9. To my mind, these drawings are by an Austrian artist, probably Franz Xavier Karl Palko (see his sheet in the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, reproduced in K. Garas, “Zu einigen Problemen der Malerei des 18. Jahrhunderts. Die Malerfamilie Palko,” Acta Historiae Artium, VII, 1961, fig. 14).


5. Hilversum, Mos Collection. B. Aikema, “Tre oltramontani operanti nel Veneto: De Coster, Dorigny e Vernansal,” Notizie da Palazzo Albani, XII, 1–2, 1983, fig. 7 (the caption of fig. 7 in the article is that of fig. 8); Italiane tekeningen in Nederlands bezit 1570–1800, exh. cat., B. Aikema and R. Kollewijn, Nijmegen, Museum, Commanderie van Sint Jan, Nijmegen, 1988, no. 47.


8. One sheet (formerly Venice, private collection) has been published in Aikema, 1983, pp. 253–54, figs. 2–3; the other drawing, representing Apollo (red chalk; 495 x 319 mm.) was shown in 1971–72 at Galerie Heim in Paris (Le dessin venitien au XVIIIe siècle, no. 32).

Figure 3 After LOUIS DORIGNY. Orythia and Boreas. Verona, Museo del Castelvecchio.
9. Padua, Museo Civico. G. Pavanello, "Sulla decorazione del palazzo e della villa Widmann a Bagnoli: Un disegno di Luigi Dorigny e l'intervento degli artisti emiliani," Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova, LXVII, 1978, pp. 4-5, fig. 1 (here Fig. 4).

10. Inv. no. C 1937-811. Previously listed in the museum under "Italian school, XVIIIth century."

11. F. D'Arcais, F. Zava Boccazzi, and G. Pavanello, Gli affreschi nelle ville venete dal Seicento all'Ottocento, Venice, 1978, I, pp. 127-28, no. 9B; II, figs. 363-66. The fresco was first mentioned by B. Dal Pozzo, Le vite de' Pittori degli scultori et architetti veronesi..., Verona, 1718, p. 178, and was probably completed a few years before this book was published.

12. Verona, 1978, pp. 162-65, nos. 70-83, figs. 74-85, 88, 89. Among the series, there is no drawing that corresponds to the ceiling at Bagnoli.


14. Four other ricordi of this type are in the Museo Provinciale d'Arte, Trento.


16. On the traditional role of drawings in Venice, as opposed to the Central Italian concept of disegno, see the classic account of H. Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, The Drawings of the Venetian Painters in the 15th and 16th Centuries, New York, 1944 (and later editions); and the essay by D. Rosand, "The Crisis of the Venetian Renaissance Tradition," L'Arte, 11-12, 1970, pp. 5-53. From the surviving material, it seems that Venetian painters in the seventeenth century by and large continued the local Renaissance tradition as far as the use of drawings in the creative process is concerned.