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Observations and Questions concerning Ghirlandaio's Work Process

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(Translated from the German by Professor Edith Lach)

At a congress about problems of Roman mural painting one would naturally wish to deal with the question of Ghirlandaio's work process by analyzing his Roman masterpiece, i.e. *Calling of Saints Peter and Andrew* in the Sistine Chapel. But since no drawing for the preparation of this fresco has been preserved we have to explore his great Florentine cycles and to content ourselves with occasional references to the Roman fresco.

Ghirlandaio is one of the first artists to give us a relatively precise idea of his work process due to his abundantly preserved drawings.[1] Naturally the preliminary studies of a single work are not in themselves sufficient to reveal this process; there are simply not enough of them. But some of the preserved drawings for the Tornabuoni Chapel at Santa Maria Novella and the Sassetti Chapel at Santa Trinita can be examined jointly as though they had been created for one single work. In sequence they give us a fairly good understanding of the artist's work process.

Having discussed Ghirlandaio's composition-drawings extensively in another publication,[2] I choose here only some significant examples (mainly sketches for the Tornabuoni Chapel): it seems Ghirlandaio first drew the composition of the figures to which he added the architectural and scenic features in order to approach the final resolution step by step. Thus the drawing of the Baptism of St. John in the British Museum appears to represent an early stage – there is no trace of the environment in it.[3] The Visitation-drawing in the Uffizi (Fig. 1) also allows us to conclude that at first only the principal figures existed and that the architecture was added at a later stage.[4] The comparison of the Visitation-drawing with the fresco (Fig. 2) reveals a tendency of define the composition and to emphasize the picture plane.

The drawings for *Annunciation to Zacharias* (Tornabuoni Chapel) in the Albertina and the sketch for *Confirmation of Rule* (Sassetti Chapel) in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin[5] come closest to the final stage of completion. Names written on some figures of the Albertina drawing indicate the artist as well as the patron together determined the distribution of the portraits within the fresco. Even if these two drawings are similar to the frescoes this similarity is not close enough to justify the assumption that they constituted sketches or *modelli* which artist and patron had agreed upon.

From the beginning Ghirlandaio had a fairly good idea of what he wanted to achieve, and in most cases he remained faithful to his original idea and made only a few modifications. Occasionally he based his works on compositions of older masters, for instance he based his *Birth of St. John* on a composition of Gozzoli by altering it step by step from the drawing (now in the British Museum) to the fresco.[6] The starting point for the two women in his painting *Baptism of St. John* were two female figures in the fresco of Filippo Lippi's *Herod's Feast* in the cathedral of Prato. At first he virtually copied them and later he altered them successively[7] until they reached the form they now have.

Only in one case we find that Ghirlandaio thouroughly revised his original concept. The origi-

1 Francis Ames-Lewis, *Drawing in Early Renaissance in Italy* (New Haven-London, 1981), 125 ff.; Francis Ames-Lewis, 'Drapery "Pattern" Drawing in Ghirlandaio's Workshop and Ghirlandaio's early Apprenticeship,' *The Art Bulletin*, 63 (1981), 49 ff., especially 56, and Eve Borsook, *The Mural painters of Tuscany* (Oxford, 1980), 1 ff.

2 Artur Rosenauer, 'Domenico Ghirlandaio – Il processo di lavore e l'organizzazione della sua botega,' Seminario sulla tecnica murale, Villa I Tatti, 1983 (in the press).

3 Bernard Berenson, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* (Chicago, 1938), n° 884; A.E. Popham and Philip Poucey, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. The fourteenth and fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1950), 46 f., cat. 70.

4 Berenson, 871.

5 Berenson, 891, 864A; Hannelore Glasser, *Artist's Contracts in the early Renaissance* (New York, 1965), 141 ff.; Eve Borsook and Johannes Offerhaus, *Francesco Sassetti and Ghirlandaio at Santa Trinita, Florence – History and Legend in a Renaissance Chapel* (Doornspijk, Holland, 1981), 45 ff.

6 Catalog, *Fresken aus Florenz* (Munich, 1969), 170 ff., n° 46; for the drawing in the British Museum: Berenson, 878, and Poham – Pouncey, 45 f., cat. 69.

7 Ames-Lewis, 'Drapery.'

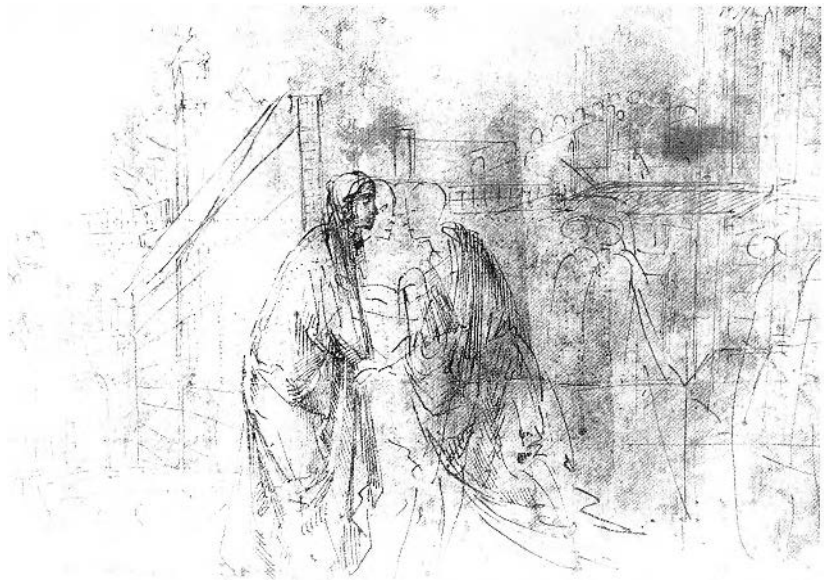

FIGURE 1. Ghirlandaio, *Visitation*, drawing. Florence, Uffizi.

nal design of the Sassetti Chapel called for a fresco of the *Apparition of St. Francis in Arles* where we now find the scene of the *Miracle of the Spini Child*. A drawing in Rome reveals the composition as intended.[8] Despite its careful completion the drawing on the *recto* seems to predate the sketches on the *verso*. It is the last of a series of sketches in which Ghirlandaio paid little attention to the topographical environment and to the size of the picture plane. Only in the freer sketches of the *verso* do we find the horizontal format of the Sassetti frescoes.

Once the overall composition was established, Ghirlandaio proceeded to prepare the details by making head and robe studies.[9] Examples for this have been preserved, among them head studies in the size of the finished original, like the head of a woman at Chatsworth which corresponds on the same scale to the head of a lady of the *Birth of Maria* in Santa Maria Novella (Figs. 3 and 4). The detailed sketches may have been not only helpful to Ghirlandaio himself, but also an effective means of controlling his apprentices. Ghirlandaio has relied upon his remarkably efficient workshop to a great extent, especially for the Tornabuoni Chapel.[10] His own contribution can be detected only in the lower sections of the fresco, in the part which the viewer can see best. The completion of the upper section of the frescoes was completely in the hands of his apprentices.

It remains doubtful whether Ghirlandaio finally transferred his sketches onto a large cartoon in the scale of 1:1. I accept Eve Borsook's hypothesis that cartoons are the invention of the High Renaissance and are the result of the complexity of multiple figure painting.[11] Probably Ghirlandaio prepared only the cartoons for some of the figures and heads. The more elaborate technique of *spolvero* is used for the heads while other parts of figures and the outlines of architecture and landscape are directly engraved in the *intonaco*.[12] We do not know whether Ghirlandaio tested his compositions in full scale beforehand by *sinopie*. But this possibility cannot be excluded any more since, to everyone's surprise, a *sinopia* appeared underneath the fresco of *The Last Supper* in the refectory of Ognissanti.

Even if the preserved material gives us the impression that Ghirlandaio was the first to have prepared his frescoes with special care, it remains to be seen whether he really deserves to be called an innovator in this field, or, as Oertel has proposed[13], was only the heir of a development which had already begun in the middle of the 15th century; or, on the other hand, if he – a possibility which Konrad Oberhuber indicated in a conversation – simply took

8 Artur Rosenauer, 'Ein nicht zur Ausführung gelangter Entwurf Domenico Ghirlandajos für die Capella Sassetti,' *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 25 (1972), 187 ff.; Borsook – Offerhaus, 18.

9 Berenson, 865, 866, 875, 879, 880, 881, 886, 887, 890B, 893 (head studies); 866, 876, 883, 886, 888A (robe studies).

10 To the contribution of the workshop, compare Giuseppe Marchini, 'The Frescoes in the Choir of Santa Maria Novella,' *The Burlington Magazine*, 95 (1953), 320 ff.; Artur Rosenauer, *Studien zur stilistischen Entwicklung von Domenico Ghirlandajo* (Diss., Vienna, 1965), 129 ff.

11 Compare the contribution of Eve Borsook to the documents of this congress.

12 *Spolveri* were obviously also used for ornaments that occurred often. You can recognize on the Visitation-drawing in the Uffizi– which has a perforation that does not take in account the drawing – an egg and dart which has the same size as the egg and dart patterns of the fresco. It is not clear how this perforation was achieved. Perhaps the drawing was lying by oversight underneath the model while it was prepared for use at the wall.

13 Robert Oertel, 'Wandmalerei und Zeichnung in Italien,' *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 5 (1937-1940), 217 ff., especially 254 and 255.

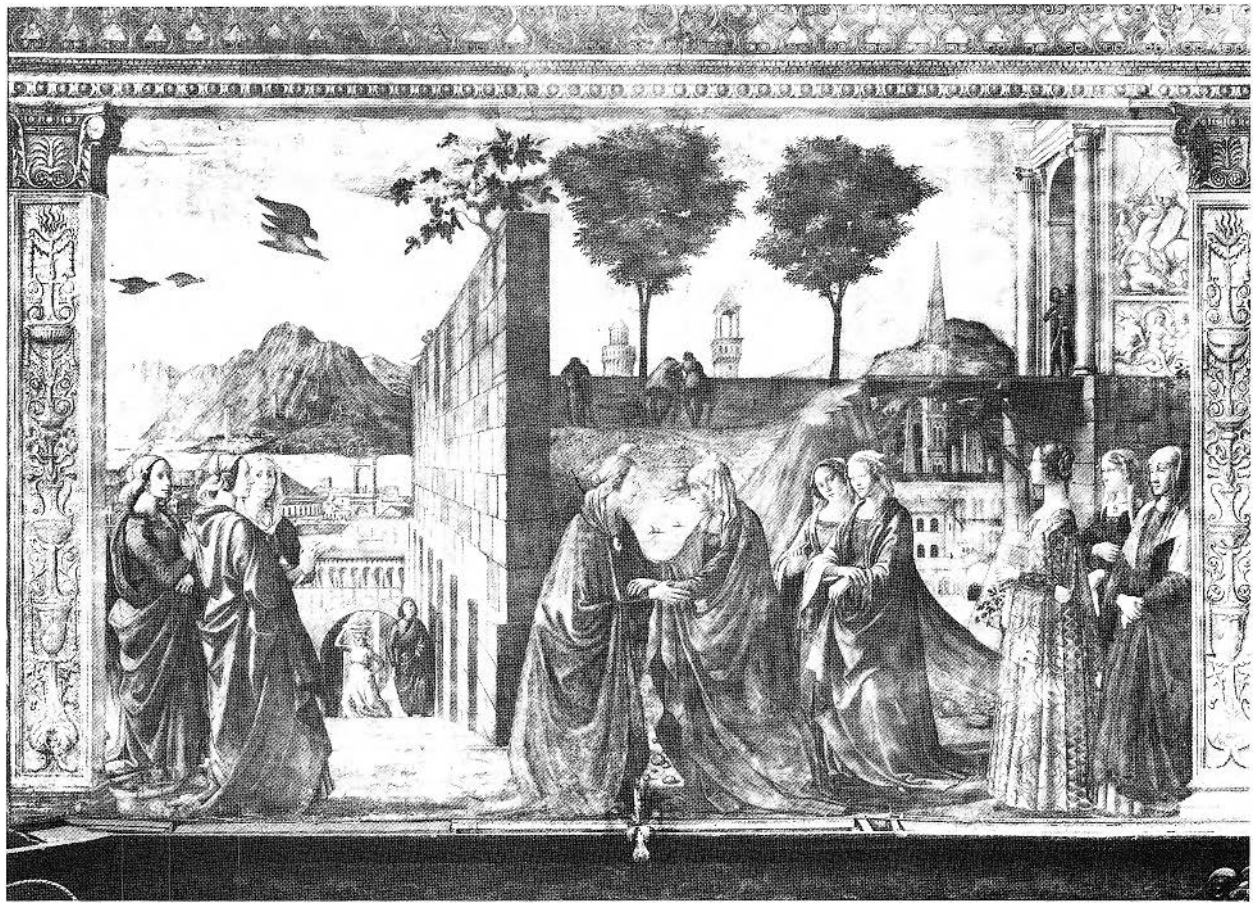

FIGURE 2. Ghirlandaio, *Visitation*. Florence, Sta. Maria Novella (Photo: Sopraintendenza alle Gallerie, Florence).

FIGURE 3. Ghirlandaio, Head of a lady, drawing. Chatsworth (Photo: Courtauld Institute of Art).

FIGURE 4. Ghirlandaio, Head of a lady, detail from the *Birth of Maria*. Florence, Sta. Maria Novella.

practices from the Verrochio workshop.[14] It is impossible to answer this question unequivocally since the preserved material does not allow absolute conclusions. Nevertheless one could well imagine that especially Ghirlandaio's later large-scale commissions, such as the frescoes of the Tornabuoni Chapel for which he had to rely largely on his apprentices, required an elaborate procedure of preparation.[15]

The Calling of the Apostles in the Sistine Chapel is distinguished by its remarkable number of portraits.[16] For an indication as to how Ghirlandaio prepared these portraits, we must turn once again to the drawing at Chatsworth (Fig. 3). Eve Borsook has described the function of this drawing: 'In those cases when a cartoon was to be preserved, as in Ghirlandaio's head at Chatsworth, a duplicate (or what Meder called an *Ersatz Karton*) was probably made for use on the wall, where it was usually ruined through having to be cut into manageable pieces, through moisture, colours, and wear and tear.'[17] With regard to the following discussion I would like to cite Meder's text which defines the *Ersatz Karton*: *'Da beim Übertragen auf feuchte Wände oder selbst auf Tafeln gute Kartons durch Griffel oder Staubbeutel arg verdoben wurden, schuf man sich noch einen Ersatzkarton, der bloss die Konturen enthielt, indem man beim Durchpausen des Originals eine gleich grosse Papierfläche unterlegte, so dass auch diese die Pauslöcher empfing. Die letztere diente zur Übertragung und das Original blieb verschont.'*[18] Raphael, for instance, must have used such *Ersatz Kartons* (supplementary cartoons) – for only through the existence of an *Ersatz Karton* which was then inevitably destroyed in the work process can the exceptional preservation of his cartoon for the *School of Athens* in the Ambrosiana be explained.[19]

The Chatsworth drawing allows us to think about another category of Raphael's drawings which Oskar Fischel described as 'auxiliary cartoons':

> When the large-scale cartoon was ready and the grouping of the figures in the composition already determined, an auxiliary cartoon was often made. A head or the outline of the hands were traced on a special sheet from the cartoon; and before the actual painting was done, the forms, expression, detail and lightning were clearly set out once more ... It would appear that the auxiliary cartoons were introduced into the method of working when the young painter was not quite sure of his technique ... There are none of these auxiliary cartoons of the period of his highest development ... Towards the end of his life, when occupied with many other things ... Raphael was obliged to leave the greater part of his pictures to be carried out in his workshop ... When the pupils were entrusted with the lay out an underpainting, the auxiliary cartoon was again used. All the studies of heads for the Transfigurations show pricked lines.[20]

Therefore Meder's *Ersatz Karton* points to an original cartoon – drawings that have been preserved occasionally, while the *Ersatz Karton* was drawn only subsequently. The intention was to preserve the original cartoon – probably as a collector's item. The *Ersatz Karton* on the other hand was destroyed during the work process, its use can only be deduced from the existence and good preservation of the original cartoon.

The situation is reversed in the case of Fischel's auxiliary cartoon. The auxiliary cartoon is traced from the original, which then served either the artist in the completion of his work or the apprentices as a drawing copy for the completion of the work. In this case the original cartoon is used for the production of the work and perishes while the auxiliary cartoon, which only serves as a copy, is preserved (Figs. 5 and 6).

Does such a difference between the original cartoon after which a *Ersatz Karton* was produced and the auxiliary cartoon really exist? The logic of the work process may have produced quite naturally what we, in retrospect, have to reconstruct somewhat laboriously. In fact, the two different functions of the drawings as described by Meder and Fischel were probably not as strictly separate as they claim.

It may come as a surprise that I use, in order to illustrate this, a turn-of-the-century example. Photographs from the estate of fin-de-siècle Bavarian painter Franz von Stuck clearly played an essential rôle in the creative process of his paintings.[21] After all, he did not procede very differently from the painters of the 15th and the 16th centuries, even if he used a modern technique. First, he photographed the model, he then enlarged the photograph to the desired size, next, he transferred the outlines from the enlargement to the canvas, finally, he used the photograph as an auxiliary cartoon while he painted.

Had Ghirlandaio's drawing at Chatsworth (Fig. 3) perhaps a function similar to that of Stuck's photographs? Can one really suppose that the artist had already decided the definite size when he was vis-à-vis his model? Or is it simply the case of the enlargement of a first spontaneous portrait photograph to the desired size? One could imagine that an *Ersatz Karton* of the Chatsworth drawing was produced entirely in accordance with Borsook and Meder, which was then destroyed during the completion of the fresco. Of course this does not exclude the possibility

14 This reference was given to me in a conversation I had with Konrad Oberhuber after I read my paper.

15 Finally one has to consider that Ghirlandaio worked more or less along with other famous artists and they must have communicated either as friends or as competitors by exchanging technical know-how.

16 Ernst Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle* (Munich, 1901); Leopold D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo* (Oxford, 1965).

17 Borsook, *Mural Painters*, I.

18 Joseph Meder, *Die Handzeichnung, ihre Technik und Entwicklung* (Vienna, 1923²), 530.

19 Konrad Oberhuber and Lamberto Vitali, *Raffaello. Il cartone per la Scuola di Atene* (Milano, 1971), 9 ff.

20 Oskar Fischel, 'Raphael's Auxiliary Cartoons,' *The Burlington Magazine*, 70 (1937), 167, 168.

21 J. A. Schmoll called Eisenwerth, 'Lenbach, Stuck und die Rolle der photographischen Bildnisstudie' in J.A. Schmoll called Eisenwerth, *Vom Sinn der Photographie* (Munich, 1980), 114 ff., especially the illustrations, pp. 130-131.

FIGURE 5. Raphael, Head of an apostle. London, British Museum (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 6. Raphael, Head of an apostle, detail from the *Transfiguration*. Vatican.

that the drawing was taken to the scaffold to serve as a sort of auxiliary cartoon during the transfer process – the careful modelling and the exact reproduction of details suggest this. Naturally it is also possible that the drawing was produced from the beginning as an auxiliary cartoon (in accordance with Fischel); that means it was traced from an original cartoon of the same scale and then reproduced exactly. It should not disturb us that the outlines here were traced in a perforated manner – and not as in Raphael's auxiliary cartoons by a bag of charcoal; this is actually only a question of the production of the drawing, and not a question of its function.[22] If this second possibility were proven correct, it would mean that Ghirlandaio used auxiliary cartoons before Raphael did. These reflections may seem hair-splitting, but considering that Ghirlandaio was an organizer par excellence, he could easily be credited with such an innovation of the work process.

Finally, I would like to examine the phenomenon of the auxiliary cartoon in a wider context. To my knowledge, the first drawings of the same size as the completed work were done by Pisanello. Degenhart stated that the so-called Hellenistic head of the Codex Vallardi corresponds in its proportions to the head of an Oriental in the fresco of St. George at San Fermo in Verona.[23] According to Degenhart the drawing did not serve as a cartoon, that is to say not as a device for a mechanical tracing but as a drawing copy in the work process, in other words, a purpose which corresponds to the auxiliary cartoon. One can well imagine that important stimuli for this sort of preparation originated from paintings on canvasses or boards. One has to think only of Jan van Eyck's silverpencil drawing in Dresden which is a preparation for Cardinal Albergati's portrait in each detail; in this case the drawing is smaller than the canvas.[24] Ghirlandaio uses the sketch in a very similar way for his portraits, as in the portrait of a dead man (and not, as it is occasionally referred to, that of a sleeping man) in Stockholm, which became the basis for his famous portrait of a grandfather with his grandson in the Louvre.[25]

This way of preparing portraits continued to exist as the example of Franz von Stuck demonstrates, at least until the late 19th century, even if other means and techniques were also used. The purpose remained the same throughout the centuries. In the late 16th century Armenini formulated it this way: '*si cammina in sicurissima strada con un perfettissimo esempio ed un modello di tutto quello che si ha fare.*'[26] '*Si cammina in sicurissima strada ...*', this was exactly what Ghirlandaio, and a short while later Raphael, needed in order to employ their apprentices purposefully and to guide them.

22 In the case of Raphael's auxiliary cartoons the cricked outlines or the traced perforated lines are a proof that another cartoon must have existed before the drawing. In the case of the Chatsworth drawing the perforation leaves the possibility open whether it is a transfer from the drawing or respectively a transfer to the drawing.

23 Bernhard Degenhart, 'Zu Pisanellos Wandbild in S. Anastasia in Verona,' *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft*, 5 (1971), 29 ff., especially 36 ff.

24 An easy juxtaposition in Ludwig Baldass, *Jan van Eyck* (Cologne, 1952), figs. 133 and 134.

25 J. Lauts, *Domenico Ghirlandaio* (Vienna, 1943), figs. 104 and 112.

26 Giovanni Battista Armenino, *Dei veri precetti della pittura* (Pisa, 1823), III.