

Sandro Botticelli's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* in Munich: A Note on the Antique Source for the Figure of Christ

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The Lamentation over the Dead Christ (fig. 1) by Sandro Botticelli, now in Munich's Alte Pinakothek, is generally dated to the first half of the 1490's.¹ It is known that this painting was once located in the Convent of San Paolino in Florence, where the famous poet Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494) was the prior at that time.² Frequently cited as evidence of the decline of Botticelli's artistic creativity under the influence of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), the style and visual sources of this *Lamentation* have received little consideration. In this short note I will focus on the figure of the dead Christ and indicate a visual source for its rather unusual pose.

Figures are arranged symmetrically in the shallow foreground space of the *Lamentation's* broad horizontal format. In the center, the fainted Virgin Mary holds her Son's dead body on her knee and St. John, standing just behind her, reaches down to support Christ's waist. Six saints surround them: St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Jerome and the three Maries, expressing their own inner emotions respectively. The dead body of Christ lies on the knees of the Virgin, with back bent and his muscular chest protruding. One of the Maries embraces his head and another holds his foot. Christ's left arm hangs lifelessly down to the ground. The wounds on his forehead and other signs of injury are minimally suggested.

The sharply bent pose of the dead Christ is rather unusual in the context of preceding depictions of Florentine Lamentation scenes. Previous studies have proposed several suggestions about its visual sources. The relief-like spatial arrangement of the composition has been associated with sculptural sources, and J. Mesnil suggested that the unique pose of Christ may have been inspired by a Donatello follower's *Pietà*, now in the Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris.³ C. Rousseau has referred to a sarcophagus relief of *The Death of Meleager*, now in Palazzo Sciarra in Rome, as the source for the dead Christ's body,⁴ and C. Burroughs also thought that Botticelli's composition recalls a Meleager sarcophagus.⁵ Conversely, F. Zöllner has suggested that late Medieval Northern art may have been the artist's source,⁶ and P. Joannides, more specifically, referred to Enguerrand Quarton's *Avignon Pietà* as a parallel work, although concluding that any direct influence was unlikely.⁷

Here, I would like to propose another antique sarcophagus relief, *The Battle of Romans against Gauls* (fig. 2)⁸, now in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, as the most plausible source for Botticelli. This sarcophagus was located in Rome in the 15th century. In the center of the relief, a Gaul warrior is shown trying to carry off the lifeless body of a companion, and this dead body is very similar to the dead Christ in the Munich painting. In the present state of the relief, the head and the left arm of the standing warrior are missing, and so are the head and the hanging arm of the dead warrior. However, a depiction of the same relief in the *Codex Escorialensis* (fig. 3) allows us to imagine how these heads and arms looked in the Renaissance period.

Comparing the drawing in the *Codex Escorialensis* and the Botticelli painting, we find, besides the general resemblance of the arch-shaped bodies of the dead, the same type of pendant arm pose as well as the same reaching out an arm to support the body at the waist. Consequently, we are inclined to suppose that Botticelli indeed saw this particular sarcophagus relief during his stay in Rome. The same antique relief is depicted in a folio in the *Codex Wolfegg*,⁹ a sketch



fig. 1 Sandro Botticelli, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*
Early 1490's, Tempera on panel, 140×207cm, Munich, Alte Pinakothek



fig. 2 *Battle of Romans against Gauls*,
Roman early Imperial, Mantua, Palazzo Ducale



fig. 3 *Codex Escorialensis*, f. 59v, c. 1505-1508, Spain, El Escorial



fig. 4 *Codex Wolfegg*, f. 32v
c. 1500-1503
Schloss Wolfegg



fig. 5 Diana Scultori (after Giulio Romano)
*Menelaus Holding the Body of
Petroclus*
Engraving, The British Museum



fig. 6 Sandro Botticelli
Drawing for Divine Comedy; Inferno XXXIII (detail)
1480-1490's, Pen and ink on Parchment
Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

book made by the Bolognese artist Amico Aspertini (1474-1552) and generally dated to 1500-1503 (fig. 4). On this sheet, the location of the sarcophagus is noted as “in chasa de misero Zoano campolino”¹⁰ in the lower part of the sketch. So the owner of the sarcophagus at that time is identified as “Zoano campolino,” that is, Giovanni Ciampolini who was an important Roman dealer of antiquities.

Regarding Ciampolini, Rodolfo Lanciani called him the “prince and founder” of a long line of 16th-century Roman antiquarians.¹¹ In 1981 Marco Palma wrote “Nothing is known about Ciampolini’s studies, profession, and personal life, and furthermore, that the task of identifying objects in his collection, apart from the inscriptions, is practically impossible”.¹² Nonetheless, more recent studies by Laurie Fusco and Gino Corti have revealed a vague image of this dealer. According to their findings, Ciampolini owned a large collection of antiquities, especially of inscriptions, by the end of 15th century in Rome, which was only rivalled by those of Pomponio Leto, the Mattei, the Porcari and the della Valle.¹³ The pieces collected in his house were so numerous that Poliziano wrote “it was full of sculpture”,¹⁴ and his collection included works of the finest quality, like *Jupiter Enthroned*.¹⁵ Ciampolini’s collection was so famous that many important intellectuals visited him, including Poliziano. However, after the death of Ciampolini’s son, the collection was sold off to Giulio Romano, who took most of it to Mantua in either 1524 or 1526. In 1536-1540 Giulio also designed a fresco based on the relief of *The Battle of Romans against Gauls* for the ceiling of the Sala di Troia in the Palazzo Ducale, featuring Menelaus holding the body of Patroclus.¹⁶

Now it is appropriate to emphasize that Lorenzo de’ Medici and Giovanni Ciampolini had a close relationship. Ciampolini, who was a passionate, ambitious collector himself, worked for Lorenzo il Magnifico through the Roman branch of the Medici Bank. The letters exchanged between Lorenzo and Ciampolini, preserved in the Archivio di Stato of Florence,¹⁷ show that they were closely connected for Lorenzo’s acquisitions of antiquities. Although it is not certain when they became acquainted, the period of intense correspondence between them spanned the second half of the 1480’s and the early 1490s. Their letters indicate that Lorenzo held full confidence in Ciampolini’s eye as an expert of antiquities. Considering that Ciampolini played some form of advisorial role for Lorenzo’s antique collecting, it is not hard to imagine that Botticelli also had contact with Ciampolini during his Roman stay.

Botticelli is known to have previously adapted individual figures and compositions from antique sarcophagus reliefs or statues. For instance, as was pointed out by E. Tietze-Conrat, he adapted figures from a relief of *Bacchus discovering Ariadne in Naxos*, now in the Vatican Museums, for *Venus and Mars* in the National Gallery in London and *Pallas and Centaurus* in the Uffizi.¹⁸ A. Warburg and H. Wrede thought that the female figure in the *Primavera*, in the Uffizi, distributing flowers from her apron may have been inspired by a Roman statue *Pomona*.¹⁹ J. A. Dobrick has connected the *Return of Judith to Bethulia*, now in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, and the figures of the three Graces in the *Primavera* to the *Indian Triumph of Bacchus* sarcophagus.²⁰ Botticelli’s visit to Rome in the early 1480’s must have been a perfect opportunity for him to directly study Roman antiquities.²¹ Although it cannot be ascertained when and how Ciampolini acquired the *Battle of Romans against Gauls* sarcophagus, we may plausibly suppose that Botticelli himself could have directly observed the relief and may have taken a sketch of the figures of the Gaul warriors.

Finally, I would like to note that Botticelli reused this arch-shaped figure of the dead body in the illustrations for *The Divine Comedy*. In fact a man lying on the ground in the drawing for the Inferno, Canto XXXIII in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin (fig. 6)²² corresponds almost

exactly with the pose of the dead Christ in the Munich *Lamentation*. In a very different vein from *Ariadne* or *Pomona*, the figure of the dead Gaul in the Roman sarcophagus effectively conveys the tragic sense of the event, and I believe that this case of Botticelli's borrowing represents another aspect of his interest in antiquities.

Notes

- 1 For general information about this painting, see LIGHTBOWN 1978, vol. 2, pp. 74-75. The latest study on this *Lamentation* (RÖSTEL 2015) clarified much of its patronage, revealing that this *Lamentation* originally adorned the high altar of the church of San Paolino and was commissioned as a result of a bequest by Frosino di Cristofano Masini. For her discovery of an early sixteenth-century inventory, see RÖSTEL 2015, pp. 522-523.
- 2 Thanks to Lorenzo de' Medici's intervention, the title of prior and the related revenues had been granted to Poliziano in 1477. On Poliziano's appointment, see DEL PIAZZO 1956, pp. 15, 19.
- 3 MESNIL 1914, p. 210. Mesnil attributed this relief to Francesco di Giorgio. Incidentally Mesnil took a negative view on the authentic status of the Munich painting and attributed it to Botticelli's studio.
- 4 ROUSSEAU 1990, p. 247. Rousseau also suggested *Apollo Belvedere* as the source of the facial features and the thick wavy hair of Christ. While the young and beautiful Christ is certainly rather unusual, the connection seems unlikely.
- 5 BURROUGHS 1997, pp. 21-22.
- 6 ZÖLLNER 2009, p. 255. Zöllner is rather negative toward the supposition that Botticelli borrowed much from antique works.
- 7 JOANNIDES 1995, p. 167.
- 8 Frieze fragment, Roman early Imperial, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, inv. no. 6759. LEVI 1931, cat. 167.
- 9 BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 2010, p. 474; FUSCO & CORTI 1999, p. 16; SHWEIKHART 1986, pp. 83-84, TAF. X, Abb. 16.
- 10 BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 2010, p. 201; FUSCO & CORTI 1999, pp. 34-35.
- 11 LANCIANI 1908, p. 255.
- 12 Marco Palma, 'Ciampolini, Giovanni', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, XXV, Rome, 1981, p. 152.
- 13 HÜLSEN 1923, pp. 127, 143, 146.
- 14 FUSCO & CORTI 1999, p. 12. Poliziano described so in *Miscellanea* published in 1489.
- 15 *Jupiter Enthroned* is now in the Museo Archeologico, Naples. See BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 2010, pp. 55-56, no. 1.
- 16 On the fresco designed by Giulio Romano, *The Battle around the Body of Patroclus*, see HARTT 1981, pp. 179-182, fig. 392. The composition was reproduced by Diana Scultori in an engraving (Bartsch XV. 447. 35) (fig. 5).
- 17 Mediceo Avanti il Principato [www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/rMap/].
- 18 TIETZE-CONRAT 1925, p. 124. *Bacchus discovering Ariadne in Naxos* is now in the Vatican Museums, Rome (no. 173).
- 19 WARBURG 1932, I, p. 38f, notes 2f, fig. 15; WREDE 1983, pp. 17-18. *Pomona* is now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. See BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 2010, p. 58, no. 58.
- 20 DOBRICK 1979. One version of *The Indian Triumph of Bacchus* is now in Palazzo Rospigliosi in Rome (BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 2010, pp. 124-125, no. 78), and another in the British Museum. For other studies mentioning this connection, see DEMPSEY 1971; KINASE 2000.
- 21 AMES-LEWIS 2000. Artists came to use grotesque as ornament as the result of their observation at Domus Aurea in Rome.
- 22 The drawing for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Inferno, canto XXXIII, is dated to 1480-1490's (pen and ink on parchment, 320×470mm, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett). See LONDON 2001. The similarity of this figure and Christ's figure in the Munich *Lamentation* was first noticed by Mesnil. See MESNIL 1914, p. 211; RÖSTEL 2015, p. 529.

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Sources of the Illustrations:

LIGHTBOWN 1978 (fig. 1) / BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 2010 (fig. 2) / EGGER 1975 (fig. 3) / SCHWEIKHART 1986 (fig. 4) / LONDON 2001 (fig. 5) / The British Museum, collection online (fig. 6)

* Bibliographic abbreviation

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