Interpreting St. Lawrence

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INTERPRETING ST. LAWRENCE

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The centenary year of St. Lawrence seems an appropriate time to consider anew some aspects of a painting of the saint now in the Widnacourt Museum[1]. A new series of photographs has literally thrown new light on this work, bringing out its true colouring and revealing the landscape background–features that can now be enjoyed by those of us not readily able to make a personal visit[2]. [Fig.1]

Fig. 1. St. Lawrence: (?) Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610); oil on copper 19 cm x 13.5 cm..

It has been suggested that it was painted by Adam Elsheimer, an artist whose true import and influence has recently been recognised through a superb retrospective exhibition "Devil in the Detail: the paintings of Adam Elsheimer 1578–1610", held during 2006 at Frankfurt, Edinburgh and then London. Although it must be said that neither the devil nor the detail of Elsheimer's paintings are present in the St.Lawrence work, the publication that accompanied this exhibition is a mine of up-to-date information, not only on

[1]Donated to the museum by the Fabri family of Vittoriosa.

[2]I am indebted to Mr. Peter Bartolo Parnis for these professional photographs.

Elsheimer himself–his life, his art and its influence–but includes helpful references to the art of his close artistic circle during the ten years he lived in Rome until his death there at the early age of 32, including their mutual borrowings and their cooperative ventures[3]. It will certainly be the starting point for future in-depth investigations.

Meanwhile some findings of a less technical nature help to explain the context and then some of the features the Widnacourt St. Lawrence. As a starting point, brief notes on the practice of painting on copper provide a general background, in that the painting is an example of what was to become the preferred method for the widespread production of small decorative objects over a period of about two hundred years. The subject has also recently been the subject of wide-ranging research, so that we know more than ever before about copper production, marketing, its popularity among artists, and the various techniques they used[4]. Following this, details revealed by the photographs point to the comparatively traditional nature of the landscape, and from this, something about the artist concerned.

It is very probable that painting in oils on copper originated in Italy, and isolated examples are known from the first half of the sixteenth century. The smooth surface of prepared copper lends itself to painting on an almost incredibly small scale. Later in the century, where the chosen subject seemed appropriate, artists learnt to fill the whole surface of a cabinet picture or other small object with a design of tiny figures–sometimes dozens–and sometimes using an eye-glass. General admiration at the sheer skill involved led to these creations being considered rare and precious, 'objets de vertu', much sought after by collectors, and still in evidence today in princely collections.

In the 1590s the Flemish artist Paul Bril, one of a number of northern artists drawn to Rome, began to work on copper. The advantages that made it so suitable for paintings on a small scale–the meticulous details of colour and texture, and the wonderful effects of light and shade achievable on its exceptionally smooth and non-absorbent surface–Bril used to create splendidly naturalistic landscape backgrounds for his paintings.

Bril's friend Elsheimer arrived in Rome in 1600, and was one of the first of a group of artists in Rome to take up the practice with enthusiasm. They were almost exclusively recent arrivals from northern Europe, known collectively as the *compagnen*. All expressed true amazement at the new naturalism, luminosity, and minute detail of Elsheimer's landscapes: they brought him instant fame, and marked a turning point not only for him but for the seventeenth century as a whole, becoming a stage in the gradual progression towards the painting of landscape for its own sake.

By the turn of the century the use of copper was the northerners' choice not only for landscapes but still lifes, portraits, mythological and devotional subjects, as well as for reduced copies of easel paintings and altarpieces. Copies were usually made by anonymous copyists, and there are cases of multiple versions of a single composition. It was also in Rome that paintings on copper first became a collaborative exercise, perhaps because painting itself was tending to separate into different genres, some artists being considered adept at figures, and others chosen for their artistry with landscape.

Apart from the advantage of needing a less elaborate preparation than traditional supports, a copper support was durable, easy to transport, and, as recent studies now indicate, no more expensive. Small paintings that could be held in the hand became extremely popular as gifts for personal use, either of a devotional nature–as papal gifts, for young girls upon taking the veil–or with a secular theme for young brides and others. They were also let into furniture, again both in liturgical and devotional contexts such as

[3]See R. Klessmann, *Adam Elsheimer 1578–1610*, Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland in association with Dulwich Picture Gallery (paperback), 2006, and Paul Holberton Publishing (hardback), 2006; published to accompany the exhibition "*Devil in the Detail: the paintings of Adam Elsheimer 1578–1610*". It should be pointed out that the German edition includes full entries on Elsheimer's contemporaries in Rome, and an expanded discussion of the works of some fellow artists, concluding that they studied together rather than actually worked with him or shared a workshop.

[4]See *Copper as Canvas, Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1575–1775*, Phoenix Art Museum and Oxford University Press, 1999; accompanying the exhibition organised by the Phoenix Art Museum, held in 1999 at Phoenix Art Museum, The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

shrines and portable altars, and in secular interiors as embellishment on the fronts of drawers, shutters, and doors.

A series of small panels by Elsheimer dated to c.1605 is believed to have been intended for use in this way for the decoration of a valuable cabinet. Each portrays, within a landscape, a single standing figure or a pair of figures from the Old or New Testament. Eight of these panels are now in Petworth, England, and another of the same series, now in Montpelier, France, portrays St. Lawrence.[Fig.2]

Fig.2. St. Lawrence: Adam Elsheimer; copper (silvered) 9 x 7 cm. Montpellier, Musee Fabre, inv.no.685. Courtesy Fabre, Montpellier Agglomeration, photo Frederic Jaulmes.

In the positioning of the saint's emblems, in particular the grid-iron, held out prominently at arm's length and shoulder-high, it is similar to our Widnacourt version, and this has suggested that the latter may also have been painted by Elsheimer[5]. However, it is the differences between the two paintings that may well hold the answer to the Widnacourt artist's identity, particularly as we are now told that there is no written evidence for copies by Elsheimer himself of his own paintings. This fact is borne out by chroniclers' mention of his "slow method", his "unproductiveness", and by Rubens' reference to his "accidia" (sloth), and the considerable number of his unfinished works. In fact the only copies of the panels that we have secure knowledge of so far are by the Utrecht artist Cornelius van Poelenburgh (1586/7–1667), and are now in Florence: they are true copies of the Elsheimers, exact in every detail. At the same time, in the particular workshop environment of the *compagnen*, where quite often features of a 'copy' differed from

[5]See ed. J.Azzopardi, *St.Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, Malta 1990, p.394.

the original, noticeable differences with respect to Elsheimer's St. Lawrence should point the way forward to an examination of the paintings of his artist friends, and their collaborative works.

To begin with differences of figure style: unless saints are part of a narrative, they are habitually shown accompanied by their attributes. Elsheimer's figure holds his grid-iron firmly, standing straight but with head slightly forward and eyes half closed–a meditative pose.[Fig.3] The Wignacourt artist presents the young saint with a softly glowing halo, in arrested movement, feet placed apart, as if pausing momentarily to look directly at the viewer; and a certain elegance is discernible in the positioning of the hands and the sway of his lower garment.

Fig.3. St. Lawrence: Adam Elsheimer (detail).

Turning to the landscape, as part of a figural painting this can also be a guide to an artist's general perception of the overall scene. Its inclusion behind the representation of a holy figure had become customary, whether or not it were factually relevant–the present example of St. Lawrence, a young deacon who had lived in the crowded city of Rome amongst the poor, being a case in point. Already with Dürer a century earlier, its inclusion was seen as an asset, lending a contemplative mood to the work, as in numerous paintings of the Virgin and Child. On occasion a patron would stipulate a landscape background when commissioning a devotional painting.

However, Elsheimer's landscape has been given a new role, for which he has devised a personal format. It is no longer a background 'extra', but has become the living habitat of the figure, in a form integral to the message being conveyed. He discards the traditional 'coulisse' method seen in his earlier paintings, where strategically-placed figures, paths, trees, all decreased gradually in size towards the horizon, which was itself often hidden behind mountains or forests rising high in the distance[6]. Instead, he opens up a panorama of unprecedented depth by a highly original deployment of light, which glances sporadically on minute features of the land and of country life – such as a tiny upland, a stretch of water, a lone rider, animals, birds.[Fig.4]

[6]For an example of earlier Elsheimer landscapes, see the side panels of his altarpiece 'The True Cross' (or 'The Frankfurt Tabernacle'), now in Frankfurt, dated 1603–05.

Fig.4. St. Lawrence: Adam Elsheimer (detail).

Against this the figure of St. Lawrence gains in monumentality from a low viewpoint and its position right to the front of the picture plane, extending almost to its upper edge; it is well lit, and portrayed in light colours. The ground he stands on appears to drop abruptly behind him to the vastness below–an inhabited vastness, and one that is essentially portrayed as part of the saint's own living environment.

The Wignacourt figure of St. Lawrence cannot be said to appear similarly incorporated in his surroundings, which are of a different order, and like the painting as a whole have a different appeal. The landscape colours follow an age-old tradition: blue for sky and the far distance, and for the middle distance shades of dark brown, which in this case continue down to the lower edge of the panel, creating a rough terrain of boulders and low bushes. In particular, the figure of St. Lawrence, notwithstanding the impression of movement noticed earlier, is placed towards the centre of a level clearing: this is marginally set back, its forward edge suggesting a platform on which the saint is being presented to the viewer.[Fig.5] This way of portraying a revered figure is also reminiscent of an ancient tradition At the same time it must be said that even these traditional features do not in themselves suggest an artist far from Elsheimer's circle, given the large output of workshops and the tendency towards cooperative practices[7].

It seems relevant in this year of St. Lawrence to conclude by recalling one of the legends concerning his martyrdom–one that will 0certainly have been known by the artists under review as well as present readers. As one of the deacons of the church appointed to organise the provision of alms, Lawrence was ordered by the Prefect of Rome, on pain of death, to hand over all 'treasures', everything of value, to the emperor for the upkeep of his armies. He replied by assembling from the streets of Rome many hundreds of the poor and needy, and presented them, saying "These are the treasures of the church". This infuriated the Prefect, who promptly ordered his death by slow roasting on a grid-iron.

We can never know the mind of an artist when he takes up his brush, the viewer is thus at liberty to

[7]In this connection it has been noted that even a signed copy of an Elsheimer painting by Pieter Lastman, an ardent follower, is an adaptation, and by one who "probably did not understand [Elsheimer's] concerns"; see R. Klessmann, *op.cit.* above, p.27.

volunteer certain impressions. Elsheimer's St. Lawrence, for example, is a thinker, in line with the ingenuity and resourcefulness under terrible pressure that is expressed in the legend. He is also the example, among all the earth's created, living beings, of a monumental strength of purpose.

The Widnacourt St. Lawrence has an ethereal quality: communicating a youthful serenity despite recent horrors; not only undeterred by inhospitable surroundings, he is already glorified, and turns to address the viewer from another, eternal world. A past commentator has suggested that this work may be "artistically superior" to the Elsheimer panel. Be that as it may, our comparisons have certainly shown that St. Lawrence has become, in the words of St. Paul (referring to himself), "all things to all men".

Fig.5. St. Lawrence: oil on copper 19 x 13.5 cm; Wignacourt Museum, Rabat, Malta (detail).