Fresco - The Raising of Lazarus

Object: Fresco

Place of origin: Rome (city) (painted)

Date: 1538-1539 (painted)

Artist/Maker: Perino del Vaga, born 1501 - died 1547 (painter (artist))

Materials and Techniques: Fresco transferred to canvas

Credit Line: Given by J. F. Austen

Museum number: 362-1876

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 50b, The Paul and Jill Ruddock Gallery, case W

Public access description

Perino del Vaga (1501-1547) was an Italian painter and draughtsman trained in Florence. Around 1515 he moved to Rome where he drew from works of antiquity and Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel and joined Raphael's workshop, where he learnt stuccowork and how to design grotesques, through assisting Giovanni da Udine in the Vatican Logge. Perino worked in Florence and Genoa, returning to Rome in 1538 where soon afterwards he obtained the commission for the present fresco.

The Massimi chapel decoration originally included six frescoes by Perino, all now lost save the V&A composition. The original appearance of the chapel can be reconstructed through a description by Giorgio Vasari and extant drawings which indicate that initially, two large frescoes representing The Pool of Bethesda and The Raising of Lazarus (362-1876) faced each other on the side walls. These were each flanked by additional smaller scenes.

The story of the Raising of Lazarus is told in John 11:1-44. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary Magdalen, lay dying at Bethany. Word was sent to Jesus but by the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus went to the tomb, summoned Lazarus forth and the dead man emerged alive. The subject was often seen as a precursor of Christ's Resurrection.

The chapel was assigned to Angelo Massimi (1491-1550) in October 1537, and its decoration was probably completed at the beginning of 1539. Massimi was a magistrate who received many public appointments in Rome and also commissioned Perino to paint a frieze (no longer extant) in the Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne. Following his death, Massimi was buried at Trinità dei Monti and the subject of resurrection in 362-1876 appears particularly appropriate for a funerary chapel.

Stylistically, the fresco is dependent on both Raphael and Michelangelo, representing the point in Perino's career that his allegiance shifted from the one to the other. In particular, Perino's Raising of Lazarus reflects Michelangelo's design for the painting this subject by Sebastiano del Piombo, now in the National Gallery (NG 1).

Descriptive line

Fresco, The Raising of Lazarus, Perino del Vaga, 1538-1539

Physical description

A dense group of figures are clustered in the lower half of the composition around the standing figure of Christ at right with arm outstretched towards Lazarus in his winding sheet, supported by kneeling and behind figures behind him; beyond an idealised Renaissance city complete with loggia and all'antica circular temples

Dimensions

Height: 163.6 cm, Width: 114.9 cm, Depth: 4.8 cm

Museum number

362-1876

Object history note

This is the only survivor of a series of frescoes that decorated the Massimi Chapel, the third chapel to the left of the entrance in the church of the Trinità dei Monti in Rome. The church, at the top of the Spanish Steps with a panoramic view on the city, is dedicated to Saint Francis of Paula who had lived in the area. It was begun at the order of Charles VIII of France 1470-1498, and remains under French patronage; with San Luigi dei Francesi it is one of the two French churches in Rome. Since its creation, the church has been run by the French Minims, followers of a religious order founded by Saint Francis of Paula in the fifteenth century, which had flourished in France. French troops stripped out part of its furnishings after 1810, and Louis XVIII (1755-1824) promoted their return and commissioned a new façade. The nearby Villa Medici became home to the French Academy in the later 17th century, transforming the area in something of a French enclave.

The frescoes decorating the Massimi chapel illustrated episodes of the life of Christ. The Raising of Lazarus is described in the Gospels (John: 11): at the request of the sisters Martha and Mary, Jesus visits the grave of their brother Lazarus and raises him from the dead. In 362-1876 Jesus stands at the right with Lazarus on the left, Martha and Mary kneel between them, while a crowd witnesses the miracle.

The frescoes from the Massimi chapel were probably detached by the Roman restorer Pietro Palmaroli, famous for his technique of...
transferring fresco onto canvas. Around the same time, Palmaroli detached Daniele da Volterra’s Deposition from the cross from the nearby Orsini chapel in the same church.

The fresco appears to have later belonged to Lucien Bonaparte (1775-1840), Emperor Napoleon’s brother, and appears in two auction catalogues of items from his collection sold in London (6 February 1815, lot 73; 14 May 1816, lot 88). Bonaparte probably acquired the fresco sometime between 1804 and 1810 when he was in Italy, in Rome and then Florence. After the fall of Napoleon in 1814, Lucien was captured and taken to England. At Rome in April 1805, the dealer James Irvine had approached Vincenzo Pacetti - an artist-dealer who procured many works of art for Lucien Bonaparte - with a work by Perino del Vaga which he hoped Bonaparte would buy: this may possibly have been The Raising of Lazarus. Alternately, it is possible that the fresco remained in situ until the French occupied Rome and secularised many of its churches. The unique survival of 362-1876 from the decorations of the Massimi chapel may be explained by French affection for St. Lazare, traditionally believed to be the first bishop of Marseille. The fresco is severely damaged. Losses probably occurred when it was detached and transferred onto canvas, and the heads behind Lazarus have lost almost all their features.

The fresco was sold in 1816 for 15 guineas. It later belonged to the banker Jeremiah Harman (letter from Alastair Laing, departmental file, dated 27 April 2001) and was in his posthumous sale at Christie’s (17 and 18 May 1844, lot 88). It was bought for 160 guineas by John Dunn Gardner, who lived at 14 Lower Grosvenor Place (and also, or later, at Bottisham Hall, Cambs). It was subsequently included in his sale (25 March 1854, lot 66, bought in at 90 guineas; 3 June 1876, lot 24, bought by Colnaghi, for 65 guineas). It was given to the museum in December 1876 by J. F. Austen of Capel Manor, Horsmonden, Kent. It was attributed to Perino del Vaga in 1960 by John Gere, who recognized it as part of the Massimi chapel cycle.

Historical significance: Perino del Vaga (1501-1547) was an Italian painter and draughtsman trained in Florence. According to Vasari, he practised drawing by copying Michelangelo’s cartoon for the Battle of Cascina (destr.). Around 1515 he moved to Rome where he drew from works of antiquity and Michelangelo’s ceiling in the Sistine Chapel and joined Raphael’s workshop, where he learnt stuccowork and how to design grotesques, through assisting Giovanni da Udine in the Vatican Logge. Perino also undertook his own commissions, such as the fresco cycle decorating the Pucci Chapel at Trinità dei Monti. After the death of Raphael (1520) and the Sack of Rome (1527) Perino worked in Florence and Genoa, returning to Rome in 1538 where soon afterwards he obtained the commission for the present fresco.

The Massimi chapel decoration originally included six frescoes by Perino, all now lost save for the V&A composition. The original appearance of the chapel can be reconstructed through a description by Giorgio Vasari and extant drawings which indicate that initially, two large frescoes representing The Pool of Bethesda and The Raising of Lazarus (362-1876) faced each other on the side walls. These were each flanked by two smaller scenes: The Centurion asking Christ to heal his son, The Transfiguration, The Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple and The Feeding of the Five Thousand. Further, on the plasters flanking the entrance to the chapel were four prophets, as well as painted grotesques, and elaborate stucco work carried out by Guglielmo della Porta according to designs by Perino.

The story of the Raising of Lazarus is told in John 11:1-44. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary Magdalen, lay dying at Bethany. Word was sent to Jesus but by the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus went to the tomb, summoned Lazarus forth and the dead man emerged alive. In ancient Jewish funeral rites, bodies were entombed upright, as suggested by Lazarus’ pose in 362-1876. The subject was often seen as a precursor of Christ’s Resurrection.

Vasari (The Lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors, and architects, ed. by Mrs. Jonathan Foster, 1857, vol. IV, p.112) described 362-1876 thus:

"[...]the Resurrection of Lazarus...in his re-awakening to life are still seen the paleness and the suffering of his death...there are besides certain small temples in the background, they are treated with infinite care and forethought ".

A drawing in the V&A (2270) and one in Budapest (Szépművészeti Múzeum, inv. n.1838) illustrate the appearance of the side walls, and show how the frescoes were flanked by the stucco grotesques. A drawing in a private collection (illustrated in Gere, 1960, fig.9) is preparatory for 362-1876, and shows the composition as it appears in the final work. A sheet in the British Museum (n. 1961.10-14) is also related to the decoration of the north wall, where the V&A’s fresco was located.

The Massimi commission evidently attracted the attention of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Pope Paul III’s nephew, who commissioned Perino to design some engraved rock-crystal plaques with the same subjects as the Massimi chapel. A preparatory drawing for The Raising of Lazarus engraved crystal is now in the Musée du Louvre (RF 539). The rock crystals were engraved by Giovanni Bernardi da Castelbolognese, and inserted into a silver casket (now in Copenhagen) and a pair of candlesticks (Vatican Museums).

Prior to its acquisition by the Massimi, the chapel in Trinità dei Monti was dedicated to Mary Magdalen, and patronised by a Roman cortesman who commissioned its decoration by Giulio Romano and Giovano Francesco Penni, only a fragment of which survives (National Gallery, London NG 225). The chapel was assigned to Angelo Massimi (1491-1550) in October 1537, and its decoration was probably completed at the beginning of 1539. Massimi was a magistrate who received many public appointments in Rome and also commissioned Perino to paint a frieze (no longer extant) in the Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne. Following his death, Massimi was buried at Trinità dei Monti and the subject of resurrection in 362-1876 appears particularly appropriate for his funerary chapel.

Stylistically, the fresco is dependent on both Raphael and Michelangelo, representing the point in Perino’s career that his allegiance shifted from the one to the other. Having trained in Raphael’s workshop, Perino developed his own style in commissions for the Doria family at Genoa, but succumbed to Michelangelo’s influence after his return to Rome. Michelangelo was then at work on the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel. In particular, Perinos’s Raising of Lazarus reflects Michelangelo’s design for the painting this subject by Sebastiano del Piombo, now in the National Gallery (NG 1).

Perino evidently had access to Sebastiano del Piombo’s Raising of Lazarus, or Michelangelo’s studies for it. He reversed the composition, but retained its vertical format. Some of the figures behind Lazarus and Christ, and the one on whose shoulders Lazarus is resting, clearly
recall Sebastiano’s painting. However, Perino eliminated Sebastiano’s river and trees, and replaced the landscape with an urban view.

Perino’s residual debt to Raphael is apparent in the man at the far right leaning on a column, reminiscent of a figure in the fresco of the Expulsion of Heliodorus in the Vatican Stanze. Further, Perino’s architecture opens onto a view under an arch which recalls the School of Athens and Perino’s graceful and delicate figures also owe something to those of the Master.

**Historical context note**

Decorating family chapels was a well-established practice in sixteenth-century Italy. The churches of the mendicant orders, in particular, frequently served as parish churches, and in return for alms, wealthy citizens were permitted to establish private chapels within them. Such chapels were used for votive masses and private prayer, and furnished with altarpieces and fresco cycles. They could express their patrons’ aspirations to piety, and demonstrate their wealth and taste. The size of the chapel and its proximity to the high altar was a measure of the social prominence of the family who owned it. Its program of decoration normally required the approval of the order which owned the church.

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O119624/the-raising-of-lazarus-fresco-perino-del-vaga/