

Piecing man together

Cian O'Neill visits the *Drawings from the Italian Renaissance* exhibition
British Museum, London until July 25, 2010

The hand-drawn line is the best link that we have to early man's first plastic discoveries and it began with the mark, the daub, the print of paw on a cave wall. The mark became the line and so came form. The form hinted at volume and thereby came the shift from mark-making, from basic depiction, to artifice, to technical trickery as could deceive the human eye into believing something which existed only in two dimensions, to do so in three. That is admittedly crude simplification, but key to it is this development of mark-making into something more analytical which went to verisimilitude as, necessarily, the business being about tricking the eye, it also went to artifice. This in turn caused the mind to make its first conceptions of art, which allowed it to become first its own language and eventually its own philosophy, through which prism man sought to see himself, the better to [re] [make himself].

However, it took millennia to get to what we think of as serious representative line-work, and, perhaps because of the greater 'reality' of painting [which uses colour as well as form], and even the rejection of drawing by those giants of c.20th art such as Rothko who could not draw, drawing lies in a backwater of most peoples' conceptions of what art is. This is partly because rare a person in the world was not asked or impelled at some point in their childhood to draw something and so it seems less miraculous or exceptional than sculpture in stone, for example. It is partly also because drawing is more academic than painting, being used historically as a didactic tool in the

beaux-arts tradition [including architecture, in which it could reach heights of formal beauty which go strangely unacknowledged] as well as a merely preparatory tool which was not meant to be seen as a work of art [or, indeed, even seen, as many preparatory drawings were destroyed, so as not to reveal the sometimes plodding work behind, or technical secrets to, a masterpiece]. It may simply be because, like the birds which Pliny tells us came to peck at the grapes painted by Zeuxis, we are drawn to colour more than monochrome, for colour makes the soul of man alert, may even make it sing. Lacking that near-physical impact of colour, drawing exercises the head a little more than the heart, but, confronted by such examples of its highest attainment as are found here under the cloaking dome of the Museum Reading Room, the rightfully-admiring viewer cannot help but be more than academically interested; to hear also a little night music flitting like velvety bats through the air.

Firstly, it should be said that this exhibition does show a little too much 'narrative arc'. One may laud the cooperation of the BM and the Uffizi, Florence, in putting this show together from their joint boards, yet there are too many works on display and quite a few of them are unworthy of inclusion, not simply because they are in some cases actual wraps [see Michelangelo, who famously didn't leave any space unused on many of his preparatory folios, the votive de Cavalieri 'Dream' studies shown recently to such deserved acclaim by the Courtauld being a noted exception] but because some of them are not sufficiently good. Not good by comparison, importantly, because there can only be so many great artists, even in Renaissance Florence. Not good as they were made before the greater artists had cleared new paths to higher reaches of technique. No, simply not good: limbs out of proportion [not simply as stylistic hangover from the Byzantine period], faces drawn with all the psychoanalytical acuity of phrenology, things simply not observed truly and closely enough. This exhibition covers the whole duration of the acknowledged Renaissance [c14-16th AD inclusive], which is large terrain to map, and the moments of transfigurative, transcendent discovery get almost lost in the morass, which the long, looping corridor as temporary exhibition layout does not help in the least. On one hand this may be seen as simple honesty, given that history interpolates narrative or rationale in life where it is not actually found; on the other, one might declare that more judicious selection of artworks could have made it apparent that a great deal of the exhibition guide/textual explanation here found was unnecessary, even an impediment to comprehension. It is not that curators don't know what they are talking about when they propound from gallery walls and panels on the work of artists; it is that they are talking about something else, whilst great art speaks for itself.

As with all big shows of antique art in London one finds alive that peculiar insistence of older visitors to provide low-wattage commentary as they move peering along the walls.



'Hanging men' by Pisanello

The lighting level throughout the space is quite low, which 500 year old drawings demand more deservedly than dowagers, and all of the work is bunched in forgettable themes, some technical, some ideational. The spirit of the Renaissance is tartly heralded at the door by the inclusion of a c.1st AD statue of Bacchus yet some more should have been made of this, for it explains why the visual mind of man suddenly came alive in this period. The return to pleasure-taking in that visual and sensual primary reality of our civilisation, the nude, was key to what happened in Florence, for it was not only Plato who was read there, but Aristotle. As many a prelate would tell you, sex is a tireless motivator and beauty is a lure, so there is high energy to work which takes beauty as its primary subject. More than this is the still-shocking idolatrousness of those such as Michelangelo who made all his ignudi gods, not only David, and thus concretised perhaps the greatest achievement of the age – the making of the modern man.

Man pieced himself together during the Renaissance through the continuing development of medicine, anatomical study and revived aestheticism that freed him from religious binds. Consequently, the earliest works on display here lack in formal balance and grace what they make up for in piety, whereas the later works are exactly the inverse. As one moves through the show and the dates of the works climb to 1500AD, the human form starts to emerge from a jumble of mishandlings and formalistic structure, with the help of Giotto's perspective, technical developments in paper production as voided the need for expensive vellum parchment and so allowed much more practice, better drawing instruments and greater and greater verve. What emerges at the end, under those quick strokes of Leonardo's pen, is not simply a self-contained artwork made of the 'Head of a Warrior' [1475-80, metalpoint on cream preparation], but the head of a human being. In between, there are rudimentary cheerahs from the workshop of Giovannino de' Grassi [1410, watercolour and bodycolour on vellum], judderingly effective studies of 'Hanging men' by Pisanello [1430s, metalpoint and pen on paper], acres of stiffened robes [a stylistic fetish carried over



Mantegna's 'Man lying on a stone slab'

from the Gothic age and exemplified as late and pleasurably as Botticelli's *Allegory of Abundance or Autumn*, 1480-5, chalk, ink, wash and white on paper) and the searching figure studies of Mantegna [including the supreme technical achievement of the 'Man lying on a stone slab', 1475-85, charcoal pen and ink on paper, which in referencing the 'Dying Gaul' of c.1st BC, Pergamum evidences quite neatly the recovered philhellenism of the day]. All of these, plus the typically limpid linework of Fra Angelico, Jacopo Bellini's precisely situated 'Turkish / Seated Janissary' [1479-80, pen in brown ink on paper], Fra Lippi's very physical portrait pieces, some fine Carpaccios and lesser pieces by Michelangelo. It is a lot to sift through in one turn and repeat visits may be made by many.

Meanwhile, this exhibition may be seen as a successful educational experience, showing of great benefit, for example, how Verrocchio's slightly elliptical line informed the nascent style of his student, Leonardo, through the display of similar female portraits by the two men which in turn may have encouraged Raphael's almost spheroid manner of drawing, which is clearly seen in the *Virgin and Child* studies here included. There are very many things to be enjoyed and it is good to cleanse the palette intermittently with lighter food. The line, when well told, does much that we need of art. It has a type of presence in the memory that the painting does not, perhaps because it remains more purely a conception, more obviously an idea about the world, which, when beautifully formed, deserves as much attention as any girl in a summer dress.



Botticelli's 'Allegory of Abundance or Autumn'