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Ligorio as a draftsman : Imitation of Antiquity and the Representation of the Body in the Mythological Drawings in the Late Renaissance

Ginette Vagenheim

The activity of Pirro Ligorio (1512-1582) as a draftsman has never been studied, except by Caterina Volpi in her edition of the "Libro dei disegni", a group of 50 drawings, particularly of mythological subjects, collected in the last book of his forty volumes of the *Roman Antiquities* ("libri delle Antichità romane"). In fact, until now, the study of the ligorian drawings has been subordinated to the study of the "Antichità romane", that is as a simple iconographical apparatus to the first encyclopedia of classical antiquities representing the "summa" of the literary and archaeological knowledge on the ancient world of the most illustrious erudite and antiquarian of the late sixteenth century. Even if Ligorio himself claims his role as illustrator of antiquities, when he says to have studied mathematic and drawing *to be able to express antiquities and ancient buildings in perspective and in profile* ("per poter esprimere le cose antiche, come edifici in prospettiva e in profile")¹, in reality, and especially out of the "Antichità romane", the ligorian drawings have a more complex role and are used to express his own formal and ideological choices and positions.

This is a thesis that I have formulated some years ago, when I wrote the recension of Caterina Volpi's book², and that has now begun to convince the scientific community included Caterina Volpi herself. In fact, I have shown that the mythological theme in the "Libro dei disegni" was, in reality, a pretext for Ligorio to explore the human body through various positions, and that the theme of ancient gymnastic was the key to understand the whole corpus, especially the drawings considered by Caterina Volpi as "anomalous contortions of the body". In fact, the "libro dei disegni" also contains drawings belonging to another corpus, that I have discovered in the Archivio Borromeo and accurately studied³, i.e., the corpus of drawings of sport in the ancient world made by Ligorio both to illustrate the famous work "*De arte gymnastica* (1573)" by Girolamo Mercuriale, the doctor of the cardinal Alessandro Farnese, and to serve as iconographic program for the Ceiling of the "Sala dei Giochi" in the Castle of Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, in the context of Counter Reformation⁴. Caterina Volpi has finally admitted the connection between

¹ Turin, Archivio di Stato, Taur.1, f.6r.

² *Il libro dei disegni di Pirro Ligorio all'archivio di Stato di Torino*. A cura di Caterina Volpi, Roma, edizioni dell'Elefante, 1994, 68 ill. "Bulletin de l' Association des historiens de l'art italien", 3 (1996-1997), pp. 23-31.

³ Ginette Vagenheim, *Some Newly-Discovered Works by Pirro Ligorio*, "JWCI", 51, (1988), pp.242-245; for my other works see C.V.

⁴ Ginette Vagenheim, *Una collaborazione tra antiquario ed erudito : i disegni e le epigrafi di Pirro Ligorio nel De arte gymnastica di Girolamo Mercuriale*, in *Girolamo Mercuriale e lo spazio scientifico e culturale europeo del '500*, (Bibliothèque d'histoire des sciences, 10), Firenze, Olscki, 2008, pp.127-157.

the “libro dei disegni” and the theme of ancient sport but also the influence of Michelangelo’s works⁵.

Despite this new way in the study of the Ligurian drawings, it is indispensable to go further both in the study of other significant “corpora” of drawings and in the study of the very complicated relationships between Ligorio and Michelangelo, whom Ligorio both admired and hated. In fact, Ligorio presents him, in his *Treaty on the Nobility of arts* (“Trattato sulla nobiltà delle arti”), as his “maestro” in drawings: “In painting, Raphael must be followed, in the style and drawing Michelangelo and Polidoro (“Nel dipingere, bisogna seguire Raffaello, nello stile e nel disegno Michelangelo e Polydoro), but in the same work, Ligorio also violently criticizes Michelangelo’s representation of bodies, especially in *the Last Judgment: the forcing of the body, the hands, the arms, the thighs, all made inadequately with every kind of exaggerated torsions* (“gli sforzamenti del corpo, delle mani, delle braccia e delle coscie, tutti fatti senza proposito e con ogni sorte di storciturà”). Such an ambiguous behaviour has to be studied in the context of the new political and cultural context of the Counter Reformation that had forced Ligorio to abandon his projects in the Vatican (Casino of Pius IV) at the arrival of Pius V, and also to leave Rome, even though with the hope of coming back, a hope shared by his illustrious protector, the Cardinal Farnese when he recommended Ligorio to Alfonso II d’Este, in 1567 (*It will be a delight if you give him back to Rome where he leaves many friends* “si compiacerà anche restituirlo a Roma dove lascia tanti amici”).

I have already shown that Ligorio’s numerous but vain attempts to return to Rome, strengthened by public declarations of orthodoxy, never prevented him to take position, through his graphic production, against the cultural politics of the Counter Reformation, for example, by rehabilitating, in the Ceiling of the Sala dei Giochi, the gladiators expelled from Mercuriale’s book by the Tridentine Censure, and by not hesitating furthermore to put in their hands the swords of duellists, the “detestabilis duellorum usus”, strongly repressed by the Church, especially in the Duchy of Ferrara (*Decretum de reformatione*, XXV,19)⁶.

My project is to study, in this new perspective, a corpus of mythological drawings made by Ligorio to illustrate a manuscript containing the *Life of Virbius alias Hippolitus, the son of Theseus*, that has been examined, but only from an archaeological point of view⁷. The 16 drawings, preserved in the Pierpont Morgan Library (Ms M.A.

⁵ C. Volpi, *Sciuratti, mattaccini e giocolieri: Pirro Ligorio, Michelangelo e la critica d’arte della controriforma*, in *Gli Dei a corte: letteratura e immagini nella Ferrara estense*, a cura di Gianni Venturi e Francesca Cappelletti, Firenze, 2009, p.179-205.

⁶ G. Vagenheim, *Le dessin de l’essercitio gladiatorio de Pirro Ligorio et le De arte gymnastica de Girolamo Mercuriale. De la recherche antiquaire à la propagande de la Contre-Réforme: l’exemple du corps au combat*, “Ludica, annali di storia e civiltà del gioco”, 3, (1997), pp. 91-100.

⁷ R. Lefevre, *Pirro Ligorio e la sua Vita di Virbio, dio minore del Nemus aricinum*, Roma, 1998.

542), were commissioned by the cardinal Hippolytus II, uncle of Duke Alfonso II, to be used as cartoon for a tapestry for the Villa d'Este⁸. As I have shown, Ligorio sent the manuscript to his patron, in 1569, soon after the conclusion of his last works at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli and before his arrival at the ducal court in Ferrara⁹.

The study of one drawing belonging to the corpus that is preserved in the Pierpont Morgan Library has already revealed the same ambivalence as in the mythological drawings of the "libro dei disegni" in which the imitation of antiquity serve to explore the human body; the drawing of two fighters, copied from an ancient coin, is simultaneously present in Mercuriale's book on gymnastic and in the fresco representing the sports in Antiquity, in the ceiling of the Castello Estense¹⁰ (see fig.1 below) : it has convinced me to extend the study to the whole corpus.

In parallel, I intend to conduct a research, that is strongly connected with the former one, i.e., the census of the mythological drawings of Ligorio preserved in the U.S. collections : this research will constitute the first chapter of the first complete catalog ever made of Ligorio's mythological drawings dispersed today through various collections, and sometimes wrongly attributed to Ligorio or other artists; in fact, I have shown that a drawing of a sauce-boat preserved in the British Museum, and attributed to Genga¹¹, is in reality a drawing of a saltcellar by Ligorio (fig.2a); here again, as certainly in many others unpublished drawings, Ligorio has chosen a mythological subject -Atlas holding the hearth- to represent the extreme muscular tension of the entire body with a clear reference to the "Atlante Farnese" (fig.2b).

The catalog will be based on the checklist of Ligorio's drawings carefully established by David Coffin, the greatest specialist of Ligorio, and based on existing catalogs of collections¹² and sales¹³; it has been published as an appendix to his posthumous book with the purpose to serve to such a project¹⁴.

⁸ The complete title is "la Vita di Virbio, detto altrimenti Hippolito figliolo di Theseo, descritta e disegnata con immitatione dell'antico in sedici historie, da Pirro Ligorio antiquario famoso di sua propria mano, per servizio del Cardinale d'Este II il vecchio che voleva farne fare una tappezzeria d'arazzi".

⁹ G.Vagenheim, *Lettre inédite de Pirro Ligorio au cardinal Alexandre Farnèse* : « gli abiti delli iddij chiamati Consenti da Marco Varrone », "Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa", 1996, pp. 235-266.

¹⁰ See the three drawings and the ancient coin model in G.Vagenheim, *Il contributo di Piero Vettori alle illustrazioni del discobolo nel "De arte gymnastica" di Girolamo Mercuriale (Venezia, 1573) : il 'ritratto' del 'braccio di marmo chiamato il disco' (Firenze, Casa Buonarroti)*, « Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz », LVI, Heft 1 (2010-2012), pp. 185-195.

¹¹ J.A. Gere and P. Pouncey, *Italian drawings in the BM, Artists working in Rome*, London, 1983 : « A boat sauce shaped cup with a figure of Atlas supporting the Firmament by Girolamo Genga ».

¹² New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Drei Gallery, Schickham Gallery, Stampfle Collection, Warsaw Collection; Cambridge, Mass., Fogg Art Museum; The Art Institute of Chicago, Hallandale, Horvitz Collection; Houston, University of St. Thomas, Lanesboro, Fraker Collection; Los Angeles, Thor Tandstadt Collection; Princeton University Art Museum; Santa Barbara Alfred Moir Collection; Washington National Gallery of Art, David Rust Collection.

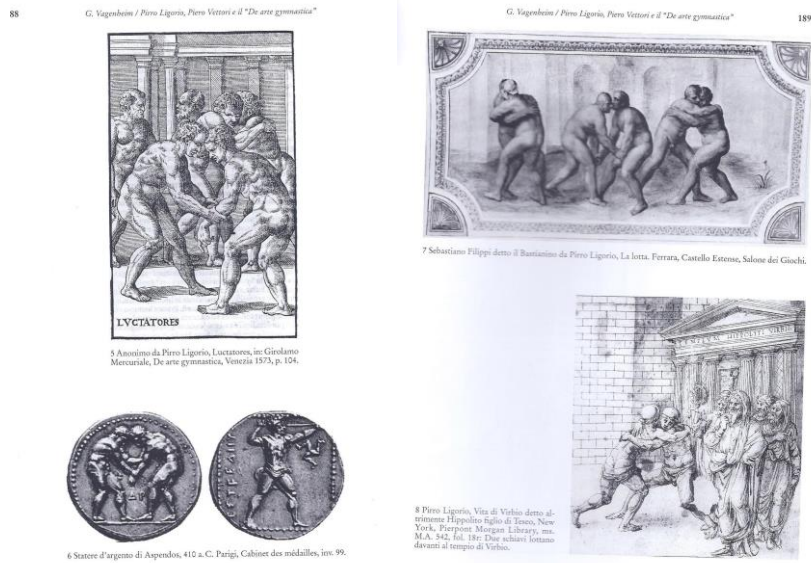


Fig.1 : the fighters on ancient coins reproduced by Ligorio in the *De arte gymnastica* of Mercuriale (1573), in the Castello Estense (1570 c.) and in the Ms. M.A. 542 at Pierpont Morgan Library (1569).

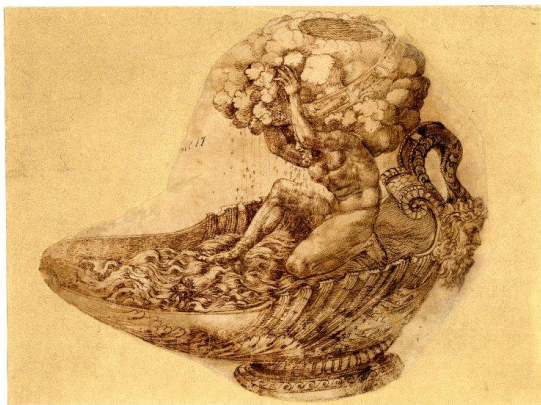


Fig.2 : Pirro Ligorio (British Museum) and Atlante Farnèse (Museo archeologico di Napoli).

¹³ New York, Christie's sale, January 30, 1998 lot 8; January 28, 1999, lot 31 et 46; Colnaghi sale, 1987, lot.5; Sotheby Parke Bernet sale June 13 1980; Sotheby's sale January 12, 1994, lot.4.

¹⁴ D. Coffin, Pirro Ligorio. *The Renaissance Artist, Architect, and Antiquarian. With a checklist of Drawings*, Pennsylvania, 1992.