



## The “catalogue raisonné” of Pirro Ligorio’s drawings

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## Ginette Vagenheim

### The «catalogue raisonné» of Pirro Ligorio's drawings

My project started 3 years ago, is the publication of the first «catalogue raisonné» of Pirro Ligorio's drawings that are not preserved in his 40 volumes of Roman antiquities but in collections and museums around the world; the basis of my corpus is the checklist of around 300 drawings that David Coffin have increased in the course of his whole life and that was edited as an appendix in his posthumous biography on Ligorio published in 2004

At the beginning of my study, I immediately noticed that a great number of drawings of the checklist were not by Ligorio and I discovered that the first reason was because scholars and curators mostly based their expertise on the seminal article that John Gere published in 1971 in *Master drawings*, intitled «*Some early drawings by Pirro Ligorio*». The problem is that these 25 drawings have characteristics that are not of Ligorio's style but of Polidoro da Caravaggios style and as a result, also Coffin's checklist contain drawings that are “polidoresque” but not by Ligorio and in the other hand, because of that, his checklist is missing some drawings that are really by Ligorio.

How did that happen? As a keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings, at the British Museum, and publisher of the catalogues of the Italian drawings, Gere was an amazing “connaissanceur” and knew better than anyone the style of Ligorio's drawings, that he described as executed «mostly in his preferred medium of neat pen and golden-brown wash, peopled by his characteristic stocky rubbery, somewhat oriental-looking little figures with their tightly curled hair, prominent noses and large eyes, unduly large hands with flabby pointed fingers and clumsily articulated wrists.”

This recognizable style was, according to Gere, that of the Ligorio's full maturity but what he intended to present in his article was different; he intended to present drawings of Ligorio's first period, that is before his style was finally formed; and by doing so, Gere wanted to throw some light on a hitherto obscure aspect of Ligorio's artistic activity.

The proposal was of great interest but the problem was a methological one and that is the way Gere had identified drawings that are supposed to belong to a little known and little documented part of Ligorio's life? That is the obscure period before he became a famous antiquarian at the service of the Este family and of Pope Paul the fourth and Pius the fourth, that is before 1550.

Gere found Ligorio's early designs among a mass of drawings that he described as “Polidoresque in general character but not by Polidoro himself and which have tended - down the centuries- to accumulate under that name”. The scholar identified in this mass, two coherent groups, one of them being attributable to Taddeo Zuccaro and that he published as a monograph in nineteen sixty nine ([SHOW THE BOOK]1969). Among the second group of 25 drawings, five of them were traditionally given to Ligorio and even if Gere recognized that they were not typical of his style, he considered it as a sufficient element to attribute the whole group to Ligorio and therefore to assume the thesis that I try to qualify, that Ligorio's early style must be construed as completely dependent on that of Polidoro da Caravaggio. [[SHOW SLIDE 2]. Besides, Gere noticed the imprint of Polidoro in the attitudes and dispositions of Ligorio's figures represented in his only extant fresco that is the *Dance of Salome*, painted in the Oratorio of San Giovanni Decollato, in Rome and dated around 1540's .

Gere also correctly returned to Ligorio some drawings traditionally considered as by Polidoro, [[SHOW SLIDE 3] such as the *Victory with Roman Trophies* (in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin) and *Roman Trophies with Prisoners* in New York); it is true that these subjects were conform with the compositional patterns created by Polidoro in the 1520s, as a painter of facades, that he decorated with “trophies, friezes and stories illustrating the *magnificenze romane*”, an activity that Ligorio, as well as Zuccaro, exercised in Polidoro’s wake when Ligorio arrived in Rome around 1534 as a neapolitaner painter (pittore Napolitano). Consequently, some drawings were attributed to Ligorio mainly on the account that the subject represented was linked to Polidoro, as for example [[SHOW SLIDE 4] the drawing of *Diana and Apollo Killing the Children of Niobe* in the National Gallery, a subject that had been treated by Polidoro on the façade of the Palazzo Milesi in Rome [SHOW SLIDE 5-6].

So from the similarity of subjects, we move to the similarity of style and that is the methodological mistake. From my part, I have tried to show, that the drawing was not by Ligorio and that all that we know is that it was engraved by Philipp Galle after Giulio Romano’s invention [SHOW SLIDE 7].

One of the risk of Gere’s method is the fact that some of the drawings now in Ligorio’s corpus and in Coffin’s may be by Polidoro as supposed by Ursula Verena Fisher Pace [SHOW SLIDE 8]; she clearly makes the connection, in his catalogue, between the Copenhagen drawing attributed by Gere to Ligorio with a drawing of Polidoro kept in the Museum of Fine arts in San Francisco.

Another limit of Gere’s method is that, in some cases, he only focused on one single stylistic feature, for example, Ligorio’s big unfinished hands, with pointed fingers, as in the drawing in New York. [[SHOW SLIDE 9] However, they sometimes merely indicate that the drawing is only a first draft or a study like the sheet of a woman with a child now in Edinburgh.

The same limits also appear in Coffin catalogue (but I must now add not in his notes) with dubious results as the attribution to Ligorio, already made by Giorgio Vasari in his *Libro dei disegni*, of the drawing of Women and children at a fountain arrived in the national Gallery in two thousand and thirteen 2013.

But after all, Gere’s deep knowledge of Ligorio’s characteristics of his late period and his complete description of Ligorio’s style, at the beginning of his article, allowed me to show, through the precise dating of a number of drawings, that Ligorio’s style clearly evolved over time, but also that certain characteristics of his late style were already present in his early drawings, and are, so to speak, irreducible; and thereby, they enable me to assess Ligorio’s draftsmanship on more solid grounds.