

ALMANACCO ITALIANO 1979

Giorgione and Leonardo's Christ Carrying the Cross

Carlo Pedretti



English translation of pages 236–242

Reference

Carlo Pedretti, "Giorgione e il Cristo Portacroce di Leonardo," *Almanacco Italiano* 1979, pp. 236–242.

Note

A continuous translation of the article on Leonardo's drawing in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice and its possible connection with Giorgione's *Christ Carrying the Cross* at San Rocco.

English translation

The fifth centenary of Giorgione's birth was celebrated that year in Castelfranco Veneto with an international conference and an exhibition addressing questions raised by the celebrated Pala di Castelfranco and the Age of Giorgione. The Cini Foundation in Venice echoed these events with a series of advanced lectures by specialists on "Giorgione and Venetian Humanism."

These and other events held nationally, including occasional essays and press coverage, brought renewed attention to the relationship between Giorgione and Leonardo da Vinci, first formulated by Vasari in 1568. The discussion continues to focus on what might be called the expected subjects: colour, sfumato, portraiture, and landscape. Less attention has been paid to the strongest point of contact: Leonardo's drawing in Venice depicting Christ carrying the cross, which may be regarded as the model for Giorgione's painting of the same subject at San Rocco.

Rarely reproduced and therefore little known, the drawing shows Christ's head crowned with thorns and held by the hair by the left hand of a henchman (only the hand is visible). Christ looks back towards his persecutor, his expression pained. The drawing is in silverpoint on blue-prepared paper and measures 11.1 × 9.3 cm. It entered the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice with the other Leonardo drawings from Giuseppe Bossi's collection; Bossi had received it from the painter Andrea Appiani in the early nineteenth century.

The drawing's authenticity is generally accepted by Leonardo scholars, although it has prompted some reservations and doubts, most of which seem to stem from Loeser's severe verdict: "a genuine defamation." In classifying Leonardo's drawings, Clark associates this sheet with the drawing in the Albertina known as Saint Peter (Popham, pl. 164), which it indeed resembles in technique and style. As an exception, Clark dates it to the period of the studies for the Last Supper, after Leonardo seems to have abandoned silverpoint for good. Clark adds that both drawings are unusual "in other respects."

These drawings are problematic not only because they are unrelated to documented projects, but above all because their subject matter seems foreign to Leonardo's choices. The Christ Carrying the Cross belongs to the same category as the Crucifixion or any martyrdom scene, subjects Leonardo avoided. His drawings of Saint Sebastian are enough to make the point: the martyr is never shown pierced by arrows. The only arrow appears in the Hamburg drawing (Popham, pl. 213 B), where it strikes a tree, not a human figure. In Leonardo's time, images of the crucified Christ and martyred saints were often used to demonstrate an artist's ability to render the human body with anatomical precision. Leonardo, too, could have used traditional subjects to test new principles of drawing.

Showing Christ carrying the cross, pulled by the hair so that his face turns towards the viewer as in an *Ecce Homo*, suggests the simultaneous front and rear views of a figure, bringing out the muscles of the back, neck, and arm. At the same time, the facial features heighten the expression of physical and spiritual pain. Seen from above and at a three-quarter angle, the figure's furrowed brows and turning cheekbones produce hollowed eye sockets, giving dramatic force to the gaze cast over the shoulder.

A sketch of a muscular torso, seen from behind at a three-quarter angle with the left arm brought forward as if to suggest the pose of a Christ carrying the cross (it brings to mind the Belvedere Torso), appears on a sheet of technological studies in the Codex Atlanticus, datable to around 1487–90 (f. 358 r-a). Another sheet from the same period, Codex Atlanticus, f. 147 r-b, contained the fragment now at

Windsor, no. 12472. It shows the head and torso, seen from behind, of a figure facing right, possibly a henchman in a scene of Christ carrying the cross.

A date before 1490 cannot be ruled out for the drawing in Venice, particularly because its technique is unusual, if not unique, for a drawing of 1495–97. Its metallic character, appropriate to a drawing intended for engraving or inspired by an engraving, is also consistent with Leonardo's technological drawings from the end of the fifteenth century's final decade, such as those in Codex I in Madrid.

It should be remembered that around 1497 Leonardo was considering an altarpiece for the church of San Francesco in Brescia, following a scheme (MS I, Paris, f. 107 r) that seems to take account of the experiments of Antonello and Giambellino. The project looks back to Donatello's Altar of the Saint as the model for a long series of variations on the theme of the Enthroned Madonna, using architectural and perspectival conceptions that range from Mantegna's San Zeno altarpiece to Giorgione's Pala di Castelfranco.

Another indication that Leonardo or his workshop considered the subject of Christ carrying the cross around 1497 appears on a sheet in the Codex Atlanticus, f. 272 r-b. It contains Leonardo's studies of the geometrical solids in Luca Pacioli's *Divina proportione*, and can therefore be dated to around 1495–98, as the handwriting also confirms. The sheet includes a sketch of a figure lunging forward, in profile facing right, with the fierce expression of a henchman in a scene of Christ carrying the cross. The drawing is not by Leonardo; I would be inclined to attribute it to Cesare da Sesto. The right arm is stretched backwards, as if pulling the cord tied around Christ's neck, exactly as in Simone Martini's *Andata al Calvario* in the Louvre. The figure faces the opposite way, but even has the same tooth-baring profile of a man gnashing his teeth.

There is no doubt that Leonardo's studies for Christ carrying the cross, of which the sole surviving example is now in Venice, led to a series of versions produced by his workshop, marked by Lombard features that suggest Gianpietrino, Solario, and Luini. The version closest to the Venice drawing is the one in Milan's Castello Sforzesco (Suida, fig. 98), which shows the henchman pulling Christ by the hair. Other versions reverse the direction of the subject but retain the principle introduced by Leonardo: showing Christ from behind with his head turned towards the viewer.

These workshop works reflect Leonardo's intentions for the setting of the human figure: the muscles of the back, shoulder, and neck anticipate his own anatomical studies of 1510 and foreshadow the classical monumentality of Michelangelo's Christ of the Minerva. He, too, carries the cross; if placed in profile like the Rebellious Slave, he would turn towards the viewer with a gaze of warning and promise, almost recalling Dante's lines:

But whoever takes up his cross and follows Christ will still forgive me for what I leave
unsaid. (Paradiso, XIV, 106–107)

It therefore seems justified to think that Giorgione knew these ideas and experiments of Leonardo when he produced the Christ Carrying the Cross at San Rocco. The profile of the old henchman there bears a striking resemblance to a profile in a Leonardo fragment at the Ambrosiana, datable to around 1495 (F. 263 inf., no. 28). Leonardo, in turn, may have had a Northern model in mind, of the kind originating with Antonello and known through versions leading to the famous Christ Carrying the Cross in Boston, variously attributed to Giambellino and Giorgione.

Illustration captions

p. 237 — Leonardo, Study for Christ Carrying the Cross. Venice, Galleria dell'Accademia, no. 213.

p. 238 — Leonardo, the so-called Saint Peter. Vienna, Albertina. Comparable to the Venice Academy drawing of Christ carrying the cross in technique and style; a study for the Last Supper, datable to 1495–97.

p. 239 — Leonardo, Study for a Saint Sebastian. Hamburg, Kunsthalle. A subject rarely treated by Leonardo; a youthful drawing, perhaps from around 1480–81.

p. 241 — At left: Leonardo, Profile of an Old Man (c. 1495), Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Below: Giorgione, Christ and the Henchman, Venice, Church of San Rocco. The comparison highlights the extraordinary resemblance between Giorgione's henchman and Leonardo's profile of the old man.

Terminology note

The Italian title *Cristo portacroce* is rendered as “Christ Carrying the Cross.” The term *sgherro* refers here to a henchman or hired thug; the text also uses *manigoldo* for Giorgione's figure. Pedretti's dates and comparisons are retained as the author's hypotheses.