Red Chalk Drawings. Sources, Techniques and Styles, c. 1500–1800

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Resistant Red

In recent years, research into specific drawing techniques has increasingly attracted the attention of art history conferences and exhibitions. The exhibition on silverpoint drawings (2015, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. and The British Museum, London) or the conferences on colour in drawings (2017, Bibliotheca Hertziana and 2018, Freie Universität Berlin) and the current research network (Universität Stuttgart) examining coloured ground drawings attest to the emerging interest in this area of art history. These projects have been driven by close collaborations between scholars from museums and universities. They have demonstrated that the involvement of conservators and art technologists is indispensable in coming to a deeper understanding of materials and their use in the drawing process.

The international conference "Red Chalk Drawings. Sources, Techniques and Styles, c. 1500–1800" (18-19 September 2019, The Dutch University Institute for Art History in Florence / NIKI, organisation: Michael W. Kwakkelstein and Luca Fiorentino) confirmed the rising demand for a multi-disciplinary exchange paired with a strong emphasis on the making of drawings. With a dense programme "devoted to one of the most fascinating graphic media", the organisers encouraged a varied range of investigations into the use of red chalk during this period. The resulting contributions reflected three areas of study: (1) technological and scientific findings, (2) artistic approach and style, (3) transfer, taste, and interplay with other graphic media.

(1) Technological and scientific findings

In her presentation of the interdisciplinary project on red chalk at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands in Amsterdam (RCE), Birgit Reissland (Amsterdam) revealed that the reason for the striking diversity of colours of red chalk in drawings, even in those from the same decade, is the heterogeneous compositions of red chalk mines. With the expertise of a geologist, the team identified 300 historical mines and presented these on an interactive map based on Google maps linking each location to the respective textual source. Meanwhile Paola Biocca's (Rome) examination of Leonardo's red chalk drawings in Turin yielded a unique identification of the chemical configuration of certain pigments which led her to enquire how Leonardo came by pigments not commonly found in Italy. Reissland's team extended their investigation into the distribution channels of red chalk over different centuries. They distinguish between the professions of the chalk cutter, the "Rötel-Krämer", and the red chalk seller. The resistant quality of the red chalk resulted in the responsibility of the merchant to exclusively sell this material, which does not allow for a clean

offer of other drawing instruments at the same time. Red chalk's resistance promoted different methods of application, since there is no need for fixatives as with charcoal or black chalk drawings. This property of red chalk would explain Leonardo’s use of it for his botanical drawings presumably created en plein air, as Margherita Melani (Lamporecchio) claimed in her study of Leonardo’s so-called manuscript G (Paris, Institut de France).

(2) Artistic approach and style

Leonardo’s technique in his red chalk drawings on reddish prepared paper was the objective of Leticia Montalbano’s (Florence) technological analysis and played a crucial role in Annalisa Perissa Torrini’s (Venice) research on attribution in the collection of the Gallerie dell’Accademia. Both emphasised the artist’s innovative approach and its outstanding aesthetic in the history of drawing. Claudia Echinger-Maurach’s (Münster) paper drew attention to Michelangelo’s various uses of red chalk. She investigated its limited use in the decades roughly from 1511 to 1534 while interrogating why scholars contested Michelangelo’s authorship of red chalk drawings, clearly prioritising sheets in pen and ink or in black chalk. The impact of red chalk on style was explored by Gabriele Fattorini (Messina) for the works of Domenico Beccafumi and by Marzia Faietti (Florence) for Andrea del Sarto, Correggio, and Parmigianino. Faietti distinguished Correggio from del Sarto in the way he was neither making a distinction nor a solution of continuity between line (lineamentum) and colour, whereas del Sarto found a new synthesis between the abstract line and the nature-like light-and-shadow-modelling. While Rita Bernini (Rome) demonstrated that red chalk constituted the ideal medium for “primi pensieri”, Alessandra Baroni (Arezzo) explored its combination with black chalk in her reflections on a new method of portraiture that became a standard also in Florence through the exchange with Northern artists like Hendrick Goltzius as well as through the broad reception of Federico Zuccari’s “Dante historiato” (Florence, Uffizi). In such portrait drawings Luca Fiorentino (Siena) made the astonishing discovery that Gian Lorenzo Bernini used red chalk before applying black chalk. This is a particularly intriguing observation, as it foregrounds colour as a constituent component in the working process, rather than as an accidental addition.

To better understand the underlying motivation for drawing with red chalk, the well-preserved corpus by Federico Barocci provides an inexhaustible source, as Luca Baroni (Pisa) demonstrated. He compared it to other techniques of the time, all of which can be found in Barocci’s work. Alexa McCarthy (St Andrews) presented the case of Venetian Carletto Caliari whose use of red chalk besides other colours on blue paper “imbues the head studies with a remarkable humanity and verisimilitude, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between disegno and colorito”. Seeking a vivid impression, Bernardo Strozzi and Giovanni Andrea De Ferrari also turned to red chalk, especially for their practice of life drawing, as was shown by Valentina Frascarolo (Florence).

(3) Transfer, taste, and interplay with other graphic media

Moistening a red chalk drawing causes a reaction that allows the resistant pigments to easily be transferred onto a second sheet of paper. Such counterproofs were a common practice of transfer, as Christien Melzer (Weimar) exemplified in her examination of a wide range of drawings as part of a current project on Dutch and Flemish drawings of the Klassik Stiftung. Those reversed duplicates belonged to the artist’s stock and played a crucial role for print-making. The fact that they were often reworked, validates them as finished artworks in their own right. Naturally, this

places the question of authenticity of drawings in a new light, an issue also pursued by Stefan Morét (Karlsruhe) with respect to red chalk drawings from Giovanni Battista Piranesi's workshop preserved in the Kunsthalle. Counterproofs of Roman ornaments frequently served the production of finished drawings distributed by Piranesi's enterprise during the 1750s and 1760s. Morét suggested that these large-scale drawings had a strong impact on the development of European Neoclassicism.

Juliette Trey (Paris) went even further when introducing counterproofs as a highly recognised medium in itself. Though not reworked like Hubert Robert's, counterproofs by Edme Bouchardon were honoured as precious works in their own right, in particular when the original was unavailable. Furthermore, there is evidence that the softer and somewhat clearer counterproofs even catered to a prevailing taste and appealed more strongly to collectors than drawn copies – which is convincing, as red chalk drawings were considered too harsh or too strong at that time. This had not yet been the case with Filippo Baldinucci, as Federica Mancini (Paris) demonstrated in her reconstruction of the original order and position of the drawings in Baldinucci's collection. These drawings are kept at the Cabinet des Dessins of the Louvre and were detached from their folios during the second half of the nineteenth century. Mancini presented intriguing evidence to show that red chalk drawings became the connoisseur's favourite medium.

Such a taste may have led to a modified printing technique using red ink to imitate drawings, an approach examined by Benedetta Spadaccini (Milan) in particular with regard to Italian production of the seventeenth until the early nineteenth centuries. Naturally, not every red print can be traced back to a red chalk drawing, but it seems obvious that this type of artistic production is more complex and hardly follows one straight rule. Spadaccini convincingly delineated the careful and deliberate execution of a red ink print which appears to be not so much a reproduction of a master drawing as the result of a series of precise aesthetic decisions.

The conference contributed to the topical question of the relevance of colour in an artistic medium which, for various reasons, has widely come to be thought of as uncoloured. Clearly, reproductions in black-and-white in older publications have nurtured this attitude, not the drawing practices or collections themselves. But this lack of attention to colour in drawing also connects with the ideologically informed art theory which – and Giorgio Vasari was not alone in this – held reservations as to the handling and function of colour in artistic depictions. The use of too many different or too bright colours, for example, was deemed to risk deceiving or even seducing the senses, an aspect that was jointly responsible for the topos of the intellectual, as male connoted disegno (drawing and design) and the sensually tempting, as female connoted colour in paintings (la pittura). Looking ahead, the conference offered several promising perspectives for further research, such as the question of how different drawing instruments affect bodily movement, and how this differentiated motoric interaction plays on the artist's imagination. No doubt, red chalk is claiming its place in an up-to-date cultural history of red.

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