

# THE ASHMOLEAN

Number Thirty one

Christmas 1996



## Three Drawings by Heinrich Schwemminger (1803-1884)

by Ursula Mayr-Harting

In turning the pages of the Visitors' Book of the Print Room, it does not take one long to appreciate how wide an interest is taken in the Ashmolean's collection of Pre-Raphaelite drawings. Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Millais are familiar names, it seems, across five continents, and particularly in Oxford, given the city's connection with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Equally, the peruser of the Visitors' Book would find how few visitors request to see the large number of drawings by their German counterparts, the Nazarenes (so called because of their Christian idealism, long hair and archaic dress), whose Brotherhood of St Luke, formed by six students at the Vienna Academy in 1809, and based in Rome from 1810 onwards, had a significant impact on the English Pre-Raphaelites.

The recent purchase of three drawings by the Viennese artist Heinrich Schwemminger (1803-1886) introduces the work of a new artist into the collection, and illustrates the pervasive influence of the Nazarenes, whose desire to return to pre-classical modes in religious and history painting, looking especially to Dürer and Raphael, was regarded by many contemporaries as the basis on which the prestige of nineteenth-century German Romantic painting rested. The drawings were in a mid-nineteenth-century album of 47 drawings, mostly by Heinrich Schwemminger, which has now been dispersed into a number of collections.

Heinrich Schwemminger was the son of a Viennese porcelain painter, Anton Schwemminger. He studied at the Vienna Academy, where he first became a friend of Moritz von Schwind, and when his studies later continued in Munich he came to know Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794-1872), who had been admitted into the Nazarene Brotherhood in 1817, and Peter Cornelius (1783-1867), who had led the Brotherhood since 1811 and had established its prestigious secular role. Schwemminger spent the years between 1837 and 1842 in Rome, where he lived as part of a circle of literary, musical and artistic expatriate Germans, before returning to settle in Vienna for the rest of his career.

The earliest of the three drawings is a *Madonna and Child with the young St John the Baptist* (Fig. 1), done in 1828 as the study for a painting whose whereabouts is unknown. Schwemminger's handling of the subject reveals the influence of Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld on his early development,

if one compares it to a drawing of the *Virgin and Child* of 1820 by Schnorr von Carolsfeld already in the Ashmolean.<sup>1</sup> However, the triangular composition of the figures and the calm, fluent description of their forms are ultimately inspired by Raphael, whose work he knew from art collections in Austria and Germany, as well as from prints.

The young St John is drawn into the scene by the bamboo cross, of which he holds the bottom, and around the top of which the Christ Child winds a ribbon, perhaps intended to be red in the painting, as a symbol of his blood. The Madonna and Child gaze tenderly at St John, but his eyes are elsewhere, fixed on the end of the cross which points to the heart of the Madonna, thus recalling the prophecy that Christ's death on the cross would be like a sword piercing her heart also.

The intimacy and proximity to the holy scene within the rocky cleft, which is granted to the viewer, provides a sense of the personal devotion of the artist, the expression of which was central to



Fig. 1 Heinrich Schwemminger, *Madonna and Child with the young St John the Baptist*, pencil on card with brown wash and white bodycolour, 191:150 mm, Purchased [Madan Fund] 1996.18



Fig. 2 Heinrich Schwemminger, Portrait of Johann Conrad Bergmann, pencil on white wove paper, 182:132 mm, Purchased [Madan Fund] 1996.20

the Nazarene ideal. Furthermore, Schwemminger has signed the drawing with a monogram at the right, which is dominated by a cross rather than his own initials HS, as a mark of his own spirituality.

Schwemminger uses a hard pencil, which varies little in tone, to describe the fine detail of facial features and hair, and the precise linear contours of limbs and drapery. Using the paper as a middle tone, and by adding a brown wash (behind the Madonna and in shaded areas of her drapery and of St John) to strengthen the darker tones, and white bodycolour (for the haloes and distant sky) to accent the highlights, Schwemminger deliberately imitates the 'three tone' silverpoint drawings of early Italian artists of the fifteenth century, such as Fra Filippo Lippi.

The second drawing is a *Portrait of Johann Conrad Bergmann* (Fig. 2), dated 1829, in which Schwemminger uses a softer pencil to draw in a much more painterly manner, using his medium's full range of tone and width of stroke. The strength of character of the sitter, and the spontaneity of drawing from the life, are achieved by playing off the detail of the head against the broad sketchiness of the jacket, waistcoat, and cravat.

Within the circles of German nineteenth-century artists, writers, musicians, philosophers and politicians, portrait drawings of this nature were chiefly executed as mementoes of friendship or as tokens of respect for revered mentors, rather than as studies for more finished works. The Samuel Anisler (1791-1849) Album of portrait drawings of his contemporaries in Rome, which was acquired by the Museum in 1991, is a fine example.

In 1837 Schwemminger won a travel scholarship to Rome, which had become the centre of the Nazarenes' quasi-monastic community of artists in 1810, when Pforr, Overbeck, Hottinger, Vogel, and a year later, Wintergast had left the Vienna Academy and occupied the monastery of S. Isidoro. They had sought artistic isolation as a means to rediscover sincerity, simplicity and spiritual devotion in their observation of the world, learning both from the example of the old masters and from the chastening of their own eyes from the dazzling 'sensual' colours and technical virtuosity of contemporary painters, which they viewed as no more than a stimulation of the senses.

Rome remained a place of pilgrimage for the younger generation of artists such as Schwemminger, drawn by the allure of Nazarene ideals and the wealth of the city's art. It was probably about 1841-2, while in Rome, that Schwemminger drew the third sheet (Fig. 3), depicting a young man in profile, whose right arm rests on his heart and whose left arm is raised in adoration. To the right there is a separate study of the head, from a slightly different angle. The figure is drawn mostly in black chalk, with touches of pink and white heightening. However, there is a subtle transition from the black chalk to pencil for the contours of the face and its shading where the light first falls on the figure, thereby achieving a softer tone.

The pose of the young man is taken from a figure in the left foreground of Raphael's fresco *The Mass at Bolsena* in the Stanza d'Eliodoro of the Vatican Palace. He is one of the worshipful onlookers of the miracle of transubstantiation which the fresco depicts. Schwemminger's copying of Raphael calls to mind the advice of Friedrich Schlegel 'to follow the old masters completely, particularly the oldest, and to imitate their individual truths and simplicities until they become a second nature to the eye and mind'.<sup>2</sup>

At first, it might seem that such advice was at variance with the Romantic emphasis on individualism and personal revelation. However, Schwemminger's drawing is uniquely individual because he has used his nephew Ferdinand



Fig. 3 Heinrich Schwemminger, Study of a Nude Young Man in Profile, black chalk and pencil, with touches of pink and white chalk on buff paper, 232:326 mm, Purchased [Madan Fund] 1996.19

Schubert as his model (Karl Schubert, the brother of the composer Franz Schubert, was married to Heinrich Schwemminger's sister Thérèse, and his family, of which Ferdinand was the second son, lived in Rome). A drawing of the head of Ferdinand by Schwemminger, formerly in a private collection in Vienna, and published in 1913 in a book entitled *Franz Schubert, Sein Leben in Bildern*<sup>3</sup> (Franz Schubert, His Life in Pictures) shows he used his nephew as a model for the preparatory studies of his painting of *David and Goliath* (recently on the art market). The identification of the Ashmolean's sheet as Ferdinand Schubert and the dating c. 1841-2 is based on the comparable likeness and age of the model to this preparatory drawing, which is both signed by Schwemminger and inscribed 'Ferd. Schubert/ Rom 1841/ Studie zu David u Goliath'.

The respect Schwemminger pays to Raphael is not one of slavish copying since Ferdinand is nude, and his upraised arm, not weighed down by the copious drapery of Raphael's model, is raised higher, and from the shoulder instead of the

elbow. Rather, one may imagine the artist's contemplation of the awe-inspiring fresco in the Stanza d'Eliodoro, and later, returning to his studio, asking Ferdinand to pose as he remembered the young believer in Raphael's composition. In this way, Schwemminger combines the truthful observation of what stands before his eyes with a Raphaellesque conception of ideal beauty reinterpreted with the particular inflections of his own memory.

These drawings may be seen in the Print Room, from Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 1pm and 2pm to 4pm.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Colin Bailey, *Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: Catalogue of the Collection of Drawings, V German Nineteenth-Century Drawings* (Oxford, 1987), no. 130.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (New Haven & London, 1980), p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Eric Deutsch (ed), *Franz Schubert, Sein Leben in Bildern* (Munich, 1913), pp. 103-105.