

A Roman Sketch-book

Bertel Thorvaldsen arrived in Rome on the 8th March, 1797, having received a travelling scholarship from the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen. He brought with him a letter of introduction to the archaeologist, Georg Zoëga, who immediately took him under his wing, and he joined the circle round A.J. Carstens. Thorvaldsen's years of apprenticeship in Rome lasted for six years and came to an end with Thomas Hope's order for his statue of Jason in marble. During these years his output was modest, consisting among other things of some portrait busts, a couple of small groups, a series of copies in marble of antique busts, and a copy, in reduced size, of one of the horse-tamers on Monte Cavallo. Conditions in Rome were difficult at this time, owing to the war and the French occupation. Most of the foreign artists had left the city, and the famous works of art in the Vatican and in private collections were removed by the French and incorporated in the Louvre collections.

The rather sketchy picture which we can extract from Thorvaldsen's few letters and reports to Copenhagen of this period of his life, his formative years both as an artist and as a man, can be supplemented by studying a hitherto disregarded sketch-book. This small sketch-book, which measures 11.5 by 15.5 centimetres and consists of forty-four pages, belongs to the library of the Royal Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters at Trondheim in Norway. Its sole inscription reads: Early works of Albrekt (sic) Thorvaldsen when he first came to Rome in 1796, found among his old papers and removed with his permission on the 27th of February, 1831, by Jørgen Knudtzon. It was presented to the library in 1868 by the Norwegian Consul, Christian Knudtzon, who was the elder brother of Jørgen Knudtzon, Thorvaldsen's art-loving friend, who spent most of his life on travels abroad, in company with a Scotsman, Alexander Baillie.

These drawings are vastly different from the magnificent sketches of

his mature years, through which he worked his way to the compositional motifs in his sculptures. They consist of small sketches of figures, landscapes, and works of art, and they appear to depict quite soberly what he observed in Rome and on his trips into the surrounding countryside. None of the antique sculptures or paintings which Thorvaldsen copied here belong among those which were most famous at that time, and the drawings reveal a Thorvaldsen who is almost unknown to us, overwhelmed and confused by all the impressions which assailed him on his arrival in Rome.

A complete and illustrated catalogue will be found on pages 26-39. Several leaves show artists sketching in the open air (cat. 3, 6, 15, 18, and 20). The young man wearing a tricolor cockade in his broad-brimmed hat (fig. 1) seems to be a self-portrait, and was presumably drawn shortly after the Jacobin Republic had been proclaimed on the Capitol in February, 1798 (fig. 2), at which time Zoëga, and presumably Thorvaldsen with him, still believed the French to be the representatives of progress. The group of artists sketching in the open air possibly includes Johann Martin von Rohden (cats. 3, the person to the right, and 6). Antique statues and reliefs provided the models for several of the drawings: a Roman statue, restored as a Muse, Villa Borghese (cat. 17); Achilles with a vanquished Amazon (cat. 26), a warrior and an Amazon (cat. 30), a youth, weeping for the death of Adonis (cat. 37, fig. 4), Victoria sacrificing a bull (cat. 2), all four of which were previously in the Villa Borghese, and are now in the Louvre; a Roman woman as Pudicitia between two Palliati (cat. 9, fig. 3); Villa Borghese, a winged genius leaning on an inverted torch (cat. 23), then probably in the Palazzo Albani; and a statue of a Roman woman, standing, previously in the Palazzo Giustiniani. The weeping youth also aroused J. L. David's interest, but whereas Thorvaldsen lets the youth wipe away his tears with a light movement, in David's drawing (fig. 5) this movement becomes the expression of speechless pain. Whether the winged figure wearing a Phrygian cap (cat. 5) was drawn from an antique figure is uncertain, even though the motif is reminiscent of enthroned Cybele figures. It is also possible that Thorvaldsen may have copied a painting or sculpture which bears relation to the political upheavals, perhaps something in the nature of Joseph Chinard's monument "La République" (Terracotta model for a monument, the Louvre).

The Holy Family (cat. 19) was copied from a painting then to be found in the Palazzo Corsini (fig. 6) and regarded as being by Michelangelo but

now ascribed to Marcello Venusti, being based on a drawing of Michelangelo's.

Some figure groups of sibyls and prophets (cats. 12, 14 and 32) were copied by Thorvaldsen from the paintings on the ceiling of one of the chapels in the Church of S. Maria del Popolo (fig. 7), which was executed by Giulio Mazzoni during the second half of the sixteenth century.

Thorvaldsen must also have seen the painting of the woman kneeling with a child (cat. 27) in S. Maria del Popolo. The figures are to be found in the foreground of the fresco "Heracles with the Cross", which was painted by the Flemish artist Peter van Lint between 1635 and 1640. In Thorvaldsen's day this painting was ascribed to another Flemish painter, Louis Primo.

The two angels putting their heads together (cat. 35) Thorvaldsen must also have found in S. Maria del Popolo, on a large altar-piece representing the baptism of Christ (fig. 8), painted around 1700 by Pasquale Rossi. The Correggian sweetness of expression found in this painting by the eclectic Rossi is lost in the Thorvaldsen sketch, but many years later he may well have had this Italian picture in mind when he modelled the two cherubs holding a cloth in the relief "The Baptism of Christ" in the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen.

Some of the drawings (e. g. cats. 1 and 10) are copied from paintings which it has not yet been possible to identify. Others, such as the portrait of the man with the tricorn, or the drawing of a painter in the open air, are drawn from life. Several of the drawings are sketches of buildings and landscapes in or around Rome. On three separate leaves Thorvaldsen has depicted Ponte Milvio as it was before Valadier's alteration (cats. 21, 25 and 29). We also find St. Peter's seen from the west (cat. 11), Piazza del Popolo from the Via Flaminia (cat. 31), and a medieval tower, the Tor di Quinto Lazzaroni, in this neighbourhood (cat. 41). A landscape (cat. 38), in which the great expanse of sky is filled with light and cloud, seems to be from the Campagna, and two sketches of architecture derive from Grottaferrata (cat.s 42 and 43).

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