



Addenda to "Divine Inspiration"

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Discussion

Addenda to “Divine Inspiration”

Irving Lavin

Since the publication of my essay on “Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio’s *Two St. Matthews*” (*The Art Bulletin*, LVI, 1974, 59–81), a picture has come to my attention that prefigures Caravaggio’s first conception of the theme of the inspired evangelist in several important respects, and helps to confirm my interpretation of that work. I refer to Jan Gossaert’s *St. Luke Portraying the Virgin and Christchild* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, usually dated about 1520 (Fig. 1).¹

The composition incorporates elements that were frequent enough in depictions of the subject: the Virgin and Child are shown as a miraculous apparition to the artist, who is inspired in his work by an angel. So far as I can discover, however, two features are unprecedented, both of which anticipate Caravaggio. One is that the angel guides Luke’s hand as he executes the drawing, much the way the angel guides Matthew’s hand as he writes the gospel. There was a tradition concerning the famous icons of the Madonna in Santa Maria Maggiore and Santi Domenico e Sisto in Rome, to the effect that before Luke added the colors to his portrait, it was discovered miraculously finished. This legend has been cited in reference to the gesture of Gossaert’s angel, with the suggestion that it alludes to the divine intervention in the completion of the icon.²

Equally significant is the other innovation in the design, the background setting. A statue of Moses holding and pointing to the Tablets of the Law is shown on a pedestal, in a classicizing architectural framework ornamented with grotesques and medallions simulating ancient coins. These details evidently embody the notion that Judaism and paganism are superseded by the New Dispensation, whose earthly features are being recorded under divine inspiration in the foreground. As I tried to show, this was also essentially the message of Caravaggio’s first *St. Matthew* in which, through the intervention of the angel, the pagan philosopher Socrates and the Jewish tax-collector Levi merge to become the author of the first gospel.

Although the possibility cannot be ruled out, there is no reason to suppose that Caravaggio was familiar with Gossaert’s composition; nothing is known of its early history, and it seems not to have been reproduced in engraving. In my view, however, the artists were linked by an underlying motivation, which reveals the sense and relationship of the two essential points they have in common – the hand-guiding motive and the idea of religious succession. The gospel of Luke, because it gives the most ample account of the Nativity, was always closely associated with the Incarnation, as was Matthew because of the genealogy of Christ. Both evangelists thus evoked the beginnings of Christianity, and in Caravaggio’s case the focus in this regard was upon the word of



1 Jan Gossaert, *St. Luke Portraying the Virgin and Christchild*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (from Friedländer, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, pl. 215)

¹ See most recently, H. Pauwels, H. R. Hoetink and S. Herzog, eds., *Jean Gossaert dit Mabuse*, exh. cat., Bruges, 1965, 107ff.

² D. Klein, *St. Lukas als Maler der Maria. Ikonographie der Lukas Madonna*, Berlin, 1933, 82, and the references cited there; also, C. Eisler, “Portrait of the Artist as St. Luke,” *Art News*, LVIII, No. 8, Dec., 1959, 55.

God, that is, Matthew as the first Christian writer. Gossaert, instead, focused upon the *image* of God, that is, Luke as the first Christian painter. The angel, I submit, is not completing the picture but instructing the artist. As Matthew learns Christian writing from his angel, Luke learns Christian painting from his – to supplant the monuments of Judaism and paganism shown in the background.³ The two works illustrate the historical significance of the Christian tradition in relation to its predecessors, and the mysterious process whereby that tradition was established graphically in words and in pictures.

My bibliography of the literature on the post-classical Socratic tradition omitted an important contribution to the subject for the period of the Reformation by E. Benz, "Christus und die Silene des Alcibiades," in H. Frick, ed., *Aus der Welt der Religion*, n. f. III, *Christliche Wirklichkeitsschau*, Berlin, 1940, 1–31.⁴

For depictions of Matthew and the angel, reference might also have been made to H. van de Waal, "Rembrandt's *Faust* Etching: A Socinian Document, and the Iconography of the Inspired Scholar," *Oud-Holland*, LXXIX, 1964, 6–48, reprinted in *idem*, *Steps Toward Rembrandt. Collected Papers 1937–1972*, Amsterdam–London, 1974, cf. 173ff. A further instance of Matthew writing Hebrew, and following the same text as Caravaggio, occurs in a painting attributed to Carlo Dolci in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California; cf. B. Fredericksen, *Catalogue of the Paintings in the J. Paul Getty Museum*, n.p., 1972, No. 53.

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³ Another level of significance in Gossaert's picture should not be overlooked. It is evident that he deliberately included and distinguished between architecture, sculpture, and painting; since Luke was the patron saint of painters, and depictions of him portraying the Virgin were commonly made for painters' guilds, Gossaert seems also to have intended a reference to the *paragone*, with painting triumphant over the other arts. Cf. Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, ed. A. P. McMahon, Princeton, 1956, II, fol. 3v: "Adonque pare che essa iddea ami tal pittura et ami chi l'ama e riverisse et si diletta d'essere adorata piu in quella che in altra figura di lei imitata."

⁴ I owe this reference to a forthcoming article by M. Barasch, "A Silenus Survival in Nicola Pisano."