

REPRINTED FROM

The ART Quarterly

SPRING 1956

NOTES ON OLD AND MODERN DRAWINGS

PIETRO DA CORTONA AND THE FRAME

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IN the Fogg Museum of Art are two drawings for a portrait (Fig. 1)¹. The figure, whose costume is that of a Pope, sits in a large high-backed arm-chair which is turned three-quarters to the right. The left hand rests on the chair arm while the right is raised in the act of blessing. The technique in both drawings is identical, showing that they are by the same hand, while the style points clearly to the second quarter of the seventeenth century in Rome.

Apart from their size, the major difference between the two drawings is that in the smaller one the figure is cut off below the knees by a frame, while in the larger one the figure is practically full-length and the edge of the sheet itself serves as the frame. This fact, on first judgment, suggests that the larger drawing is the earlier of the two, assuming the artist would only design his picture within the frame at a relatively late stage in the development of his idea.

Yet, this attractive hypothesis, which has all the advantages of reasonableness and simplicity, begins to weaken somewhat on a more attentive examination of the drawings. In the smaller sketch the arm of the chair nearest the spectator is nearly horizontal. In the larger one, two positions for the chair's arm can be deciphered. Two brief strokes of the pen indicate the arm in the horizontal position, while just above a combination of pen and wash lines shows it at an angle. Close observation, even in the photograph, of both sets of pen lines and the formation of the blots where they overlap, shows conclusively that the lines and wash indicating the latter angular position of the chair arm are on top of the others. The larger drawing must therefore be the later of the two, in contrast to our first impression. The artist introduced the horizontal position into the larger drawing from the smaller one; but evidently he became dissatisfied with the idea and then tried the angular position, first sketching it in with pen, then emphasizing it and integrating it into the rest

of the drawing with wash. The effects of the change are clear. The angular position of the chair arm allows more of the body to appear, in a more frontal position. Further, it serves to mitigate the static horizontality of the smaller drawing, in favor of a more dynamic obliquity. As a result, the sitter dominates more powerfully over the inanimate geometry of the chair. In this sense, the omission of the frame in the larger drawing becomes understandable, since, by allowing more of the figure to appear, the effect of its dominance is still more emphasized.

Indeed, the larger drawing seems generally less natural, more "arranged" than the smaller one; but it is by now evident that these inconsistencies are not necessarily the result of an earlier, more immediate observation of nature. On the contrary, the observation of nature reveals a consistent whole; inconsistencies result when the artist begins to subject that observation to his aesthetic requirements.

If then, the original hypothesis concerning the two drawings proves untenable, what is the real situation? The problem receives clarification when the larger drawing is compared with a portrait of *Urban VIII* by Pietro da Cortona, formerly in the Capitoline and now in the Museo di Roma at the Palazzo Braschi (Fig. 2).² The figure is here also seen full-length, and the painting generally continues the tendencies that we observed in the changes between the two drawings. The arrangement of the chair is even more irrational, and now the two arms have no conceivable relationship to the back. This distortion, as in the larger drawing, permits a more full-face, and consequently more dominant view of the figure, while the chair is kept on a three-quarter angle; the discrepancy itself produces a tension which enlivens the composition and emphasizes the figure even further. At the same time, the awkward angle of the nearer chair arm is relieved by transforming the emphatic straight line into a softer curve. Finally, the back of the chair is lowered, allowing the head a more monumental isolation. There can be no doubt that the drawings are studies by Cortona for his portrait of *Urban VIII*.³

Furthermore, analysis has revealed a rather surprising situation: namely, that the smaller drawing is the earlier of the two, and therefore that Cortona first studied the composition with its frame, then without it. There appears here a curious inversion of the successive stages in the creative process which had become standard in the Renaissance. In the earlier period, generally, the composition was first studied in itself, and then only did the artist try it within the frame.⁴ Indeed, the development of Renaissance perspective, the "window

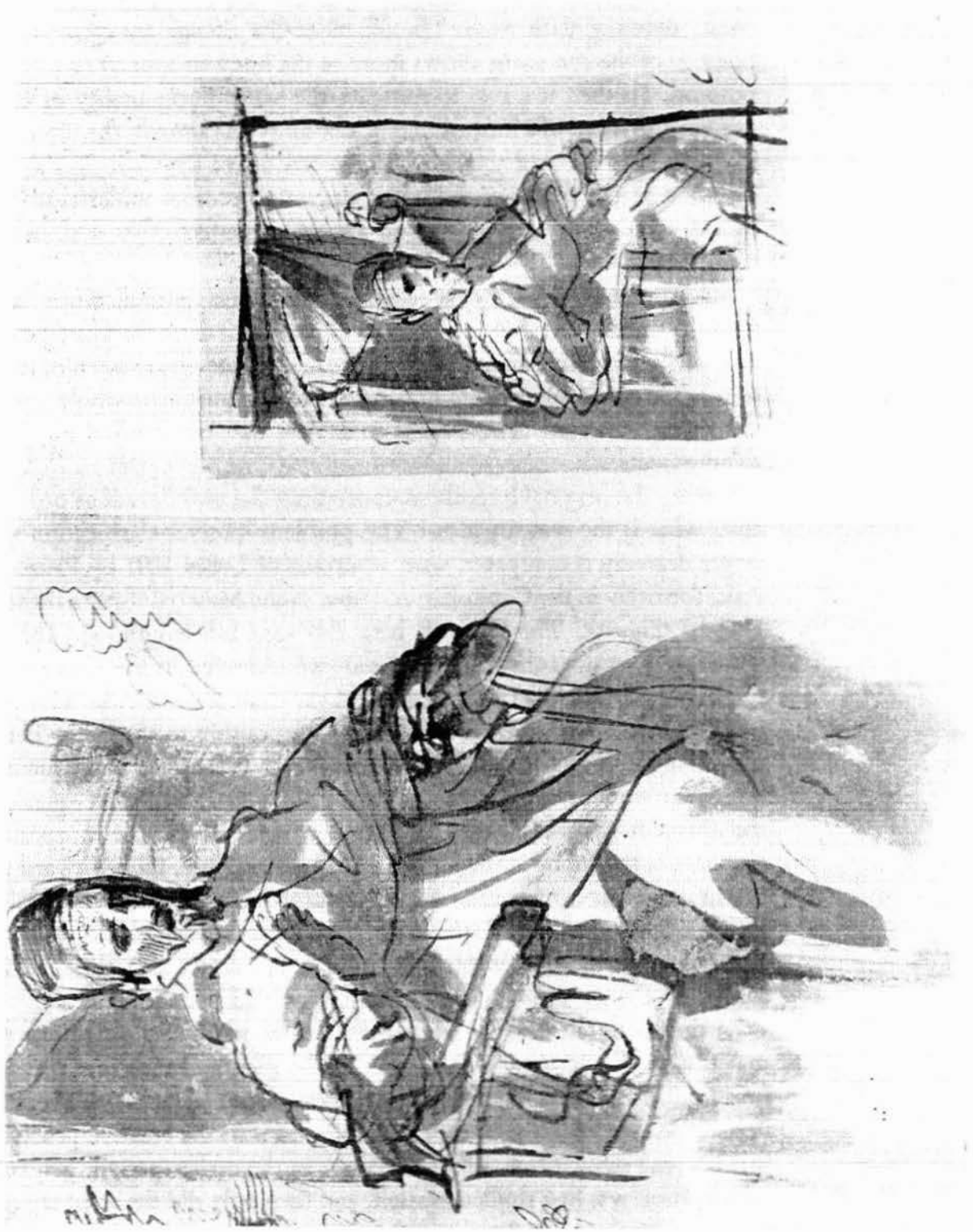


Fig. 1. PIETRO DA CORTONA, Studies for Portrait of Urban VIII
Harvard University, The Fogg Museum of Art



Fig. 2. PIETRO DA CORTONA, *Portrait of Urban VIII*
Rome, Palazzo Braschi, Museo di Roma



Fig. 3. GUIDOBALDO ABBATINI, *Portrait of Urban VIII*
Rome, Galleria Nazionale

into space," necessarily produced an inviolable barrier between the real world and the work of art, a barrier which was embodied in the frame. It remained for the Baroque, after the conflicting experiments of Mannerism, to destroy this barrier, allowing the depicted world to flow freely over into reality; and often vice-versa. The Fogg drawings provide an insight into the breakdown of the classic system. They illustrate *in nuce* the great revolution which Cortona was to perpetrate in the Barberini ceiling, where the distinction between actuality and illusion is completely annihilated.

¹ Pen and wash in both cases; large: 15.7 × 11.2 cm; small: 9.30 × 6.00 cm. Cf. Mongan-Sachs, *Drawings in the Fogg Museum*, Cambridge, 1946, I, 146, nos. 294, 295.

² The portrait undoubtedly formed part of the Sacchetti collection (Cortona's patrons, to whom he owed his association with the Pope). It is mentioned in the Capitoline as early as 1775: *Descrizione delle statue, bassirilievi, busti, altri antichi, monumenti, e quadri de piu celebri penelli, che si custodiscono nei palazzi di Campidoglio*, Roma, a Spese di Gaetano Quojani, p. 165. The portrait is badly overpainted, particularly the face, but it must surely date from the first ten years of Urban's reign.

³ With this picture Cortona created a much imitated type for papal portraits. One of the closest reflections is a painting of Urban by Guidobaldo Abbatini now in the Galleria Nazionale at the Palazzo Barberini, reproduced here presumably for the first time (Fig. 3, formerly in the Galleria Spada; A. Porcella, *Le Pitture della Galleria Spada*, Rome, 1932, p. 193). On several occasions Abbatini executed works after Cortona's cartoons (cf. Passeri, ed. Hess, p. 240, n.l. and Titi, *Ammaestramento*, Rome, 1686, p. 14).

⁴ Compare, among the innumerable examples, two early drawings by Raphael in Oxford and Lille, for a *Madonna at the Window*: Fischel, *Raphaels Zeichnungen*, Berlin, 1931-41, nos. 46 and 50.