

Vittore Carpaccio (1460/1466? – 1525/1526), an innovative draughtsman

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Fig. 1 / Vittore Carpaccio,
Study of the Virgin and Child,
ca. 1490, pen and ink over
red chalk, 12.8 x 9.3 cm,
London, Courtauld Institute
of Art Gallery.

In studies of Venetian drawing the idea that red chalk was introduced to Venice by Leonardo da Vinci during his sojourn there in 1500 has traditionally formed part of a narrative whereby the work of the Florentine genius spurred the avant-garde Venetian, Giorgione and those in his circle to develop a sensuous mode of drawing. Undoubtedly, Leonardo's expressive studies in red chalk of about 1495 for the heads of apostles in the *Last Supper* attest to his virtuoso use of the medium by that time, and had a lasting impact on drawing in Lombardy and elsewhere.¹ Vittore Carpaccio by contrast has often been perceived as a conservative artist rooted in earlier fifteenth-century conventions, whose surviving *oeuvre* in drawing provides evidence of copying and repetition in workshop practice rather than of inventive flair. Yet red chalk was used by Carpaccio in ways that mark him out as an innovative artist, notably for his combination of red chalk with pen and ink in compositional drawings.

Inventive sketches in red chalk overlaid with further thoughts in pen and ink, a felicitous technique in terms of its visual impact, is common in eighteenth-century Venetian drawings. That the technique was also widely used by seventeenth-century artists in Venice is attested by the variety of examples found in the work of Giulio Carpioni, Johann Carl Loth, Giuseppe Diamantini, Antonio Molinari or Gregorio Lazzarini. Not surprisingly, the technique was explored by Palma Giovane, and also by contemporaries such as Pietro Malombra. Earlier Venetian sixteenth-century examples are rarer (which may be a question of survival, rather than of changes in drawing practice)

so that it is particularly important to recognize Carpaccio's achievements in this regard. Jennifer Fletcher closely scrutinized a double-sheet with studies of the Virgin and Child in the Courtauld Institute in an article of 2001 (fig. 1).² Her acute observations brought into focus for me the originality that Carpaccio demonstrated in these drawings. Jennifer noted the substantial use of the red chalk, and the way in which the dotted, broken pen lines anticipated the light effects of the eventual painting. In an important article of 2004, Caroline Brooke examined Carpaccio's design process in working towards the complex narratives of the Scuola di San Giorgio paintings, emphasizing his flexibility and openness to revision even at a late stage in the process.³ More recently, in discussing the Courtauld sheet and the large compositional drawing in the Uffizi, *The Triumph of St George*, I have highlighted Carpaccio's experimental approach particularly in the dynamic interaction of red chalk with pen and ink.⁴

How significant is Carpaccio's use of red chalk with ink in his inventive or compositional studies, and how might this compare with contemporary uses? Red chalk is first found as a drawing medium in the Pollaiuolo workshop in late 1460s Florence, when Piero del Pollaiuolo combined it with charcoal in a head study that functioned as a full-scale cartoon, pricked for transfer; above all Leonardo demonstrated its expressive potential by the mid-1490s.⁵ Earlier in the Quattrocento, various artists including Pisanello had rubbed or wetted red chalk onto paper to provide a mid-tone for figurative drawings in ink.

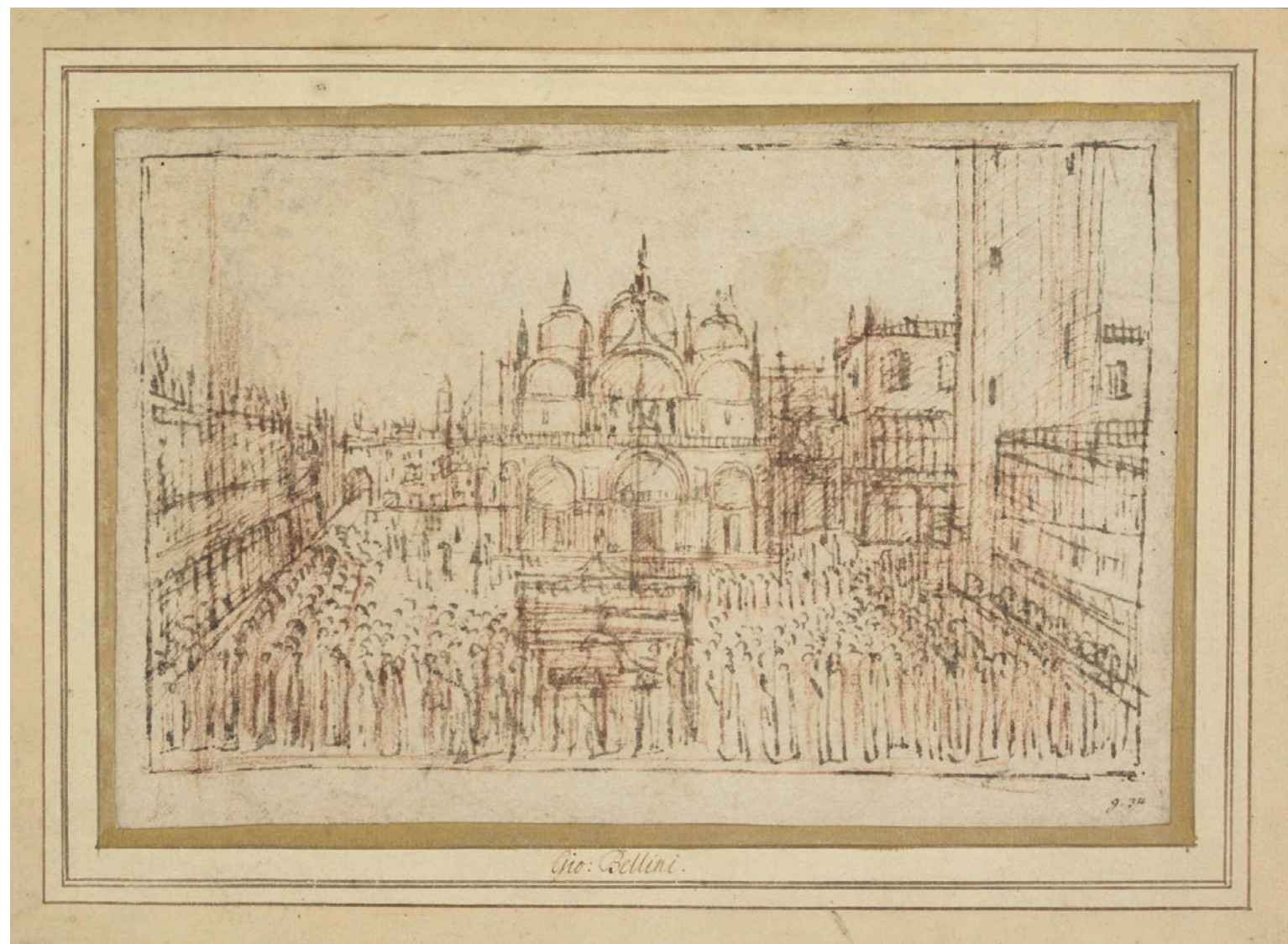


Fig. 2 / Gentile Bellini, *A Procession in Saint Mark's Square, Viewed from a Height*, 1496, pen and ink over red chalk, 13 x 19.3 cm, London, British Museum.

The growing interest in red chalk as a warm-toned medium that could be used broadly or sharply can be charted in its forceful use in combination with black chalk by Luca Signorelli around 1500, in a group of figure studies relating to the Orvieto commission; as a medium for free sketches of the Madonna and Child by Raphael about 1506; or in a richly layered form in the elaborately modelled *ignudo* studies by Michelangelo for the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Suffusing black chalk or charcoal figure studies with warmth by applying red chalk to certain areas, as did Piero del Pollaiuolo and Signorelli, was not uncommon. However, using red chalk in combination with pen and ink was far from conventional in the years around 1500 (though examples can be found in Leonardo's practice). In the 1500s, both Raphael and Michelangelo might use red chalk on the same sheet as other studies in pen and ink, but not as a

rule in a layered technique where red chalk is worked over in ink as an integral part of the artist's thinking on a particular composition. Michelangelo would go on to make various studies using this method, such as an evolving narrative scene about 1516-1520 relating to the façade of San Lorenzo, Florence, begun in red chalk and continued, pen in hand; he would also overlay ink and red chalk in architectural studies (superb examples are found in his studies of fortifications).⁶

From Venice in the 1490s two compositional drawings in this technique by Gentile Bellini have come down to us, one in the British Museum and the other at Chatsworth (fig. 2).⁷ Both are associated with the cycle of paintings for the Sala della Croce of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, and datable ca. 1496. It seems plausible to suppose that this technique was

previously in use in the Bellini studio, where Carpaccio was traditionally thought to have trained,⁸ if only because the older Gentile employed it in these inventive sketches in a purposeful, adept manner. Nonetheless, no examples are known that pre-date the Courtauld studies by Carpaccio.⁹ Another technique, that of the tonal drawing on blue paper with brush, ink, and white heightening often over black chalk, used by Vittore throughout his career, does seem to have been widely disseminated in the circle of Giovanni Bellini. The highly-worked chiaroscuro drawing, the *Head of a Bearded Man* in the Royal Collection, generally agreed to be by Giovanni about 1460-1470, provides a landmark in the development of the technique, which was employed by artists associated with Bellini such as Alvise Vivarini or Cima da Conegliano, and exploited brilliantly by Carpaccio.¹⁰

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Carpaccio's approach is his broad, decisive handling of the red chalk, which is unlike Gentile Bellini's more meticulous, sharp treatment as he set out in chalk, albeit schematically, the flow of a procession against the topography of the Piazza. The contrast is especially evident in the vivid swirls of the grainy medium as Carpaccio considered alternative possibilities for the harbour area in the study in the British Museum that clearly relates to the landscape setting at the left of *Saint Ursula and the Prince Taking Leave of their Parents*, painted in 1495 for the Scuola di Sant'Orsola (fig. 3). He based much of the architectural detail of the fortified hillside on a favoured print source, the woodcuts by Erhard Recuwich used as illustrations to Bernhard von Breydenbach's *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* (1486), so that only minor revisions were made to the red chalk indications as he built up the composition with the pen.



Fig. 3 / Vittore Carpaccio, *A Fortified Harbour with Shipping*, ca. 1495, pen and ink over red chalk, 17.2 x 19.1 cm, London, British Museum.



Fig. 4 / Vittore Carpaccio, *Virgin and Child and two Female Saints*, ca. 1500-1505, pen and ink, brown wash, over red and black chalk, 19 x 23.5 cm, New York, The Morgan Library.

However, the harbour area is a locus for experimentation at the intersection of land and water, where the shape of the mole and the types of shipping are freely suggested with a spirited handling of the chalk.

Vittore continued to work on compositions using this combined technique, in each case adapting his handling in keeping with the subject or with the stage he had reached in the design process. His use of the red chalk for thinking on paper is seen even at an advanced stage, as in a compositional drawing relating to the *Virgin and Child with Female Saints* of uncertain date, ca. 1500-1505, in Avignon (fig. 4). Here the strong pressure of his hand on the blunt, earthy chalk is evident in the improvised delineations of a craggy

rock formation and the habitats of hermit saints, followed by strongly accentuated revisions in ink that, together with light washes, create potent tonal relations with the red.¹¹ The main figure group of the *sacra conversazione* had previously been studied in two other sheets, so that little alteration was now required to their disposition, but Carpaccio was still concerned with injecting the landscape with drama and visual interest. By contrast, a more even handling is seen in the exploratory red chalk study for a narrative of the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* painted in 1515 for the church of San Antonio di Castello (fig. 5).¹² Carpaccio tackled this complex subject by shaping a centrifugal design with a crowd surging around the group of six crosses; a further narrative episode is indicated at the



Fig. 5 / Vittore Carpaccio, *Study for the Martyrdom of Ten Thousand*, ca. 1514, red chalk, 21.3 x 29.7 cm, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.

left, while a serpentine movement in depth draws our gaze towards the rearing mountain and heavenly vision. The vertical direction of the composition is re-asserted with the two firmly planted upright crosses at the right. The rectangular format that emerged at this stage of reflection, to be defined by framing lines, was not in the end what the commission required, so that Vittore did not need to take this particular design forward with further exploration in pen and ink. The light handling of the chalk and the shorthand treatment of figures brings us closer to Gentile Bellini's schematic approach seen in the British Museum and Chatsworth sheets, giving us a sense of the appearance of the older master's initial red chalk sketches. Yet Carpaccio's individual character is clear not only in the greater

agility of the figures but particularly in his consideration of the effects of light and atmosphere, with the red chalk used broadly and vigorously to model the landscape setting and to evoke a tempestuous sky.

The sensuous use of the red chalk in its material qualities, already visible in Vittore's *Virgin and Child* studies of ca. 1490, can be seen in later drawings attributed to Giorgione and other Venetian artists.¹³ However, the richness of tonality and the sense of graphic vitality realized by the overlaying of ink, often used lavishly, with the grainy texture and warm hue of red chalk may be Carpaccio's distinctive and original achievement in drawing in the years around 1500 in Venice.

NOTES

1. Maddalena Spagnolo, “La matita rossa come luce e colore: verifiche sulle studi di teste di Leonardo e dei leonardeschi,” *Polittico* 1 (2000): pp. 65-82.
2. Jennifer Fletcher, “Carpaccio at the Courtauld Institute,” *British Art Journal* 2 (2001): pp. 71-74.
3. Caroline Brooke, “Carpaccio’s Method of Composition in his Drawings for the Scuola di S.Giorgio Teleri,” *Master Drawings* 42 (2001): pp. 302-314.
4. Catherine Whistler, *Venice and Drawing 1500-1800. Theory, Practice and Collecting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), respectively pp. xvii-xviii and pp. 206-208.
5. Hugo Chapman and Marzia Faietti, *From Fra Angelico to Leonardo: Italian Renaissance Drawings*, exh. cat. (London: British Museum, 2010), no. 33.
6. London, Courtauld Institute, inv. D1978.PG422, pen and brown ink partly over red chalk; see Carmen Bambach, ed., *Michelangelo Divine Draftsman and Designer*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), no. 38 and p. 108, and in the same volume, a discussion of the fortification drawings of 1527-1529 by Mauro Mussolin (nos. 104, 105, pp. 275-576).
7. London, British Museum, inv. 1933.0803.12, and Chatsworth House, Devonshire Collection, inv. 738; see Caroline Campbell and Alan Chong, *Bellini and the East*, exh. cat. (Boston and London: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and National Gallery, 2005), nos. 9 and 10, pp. 50-53. See Francis Ames-Lewis and Joanne Wright, *Drawing in the Italian Renaissance Workshop*, exh. cat. (Nottingham and London: University Art Gallery and Victoria & Albert Museum, 1983), no. 57, for a discussion of the Chatsworth drawing where it is observed that red chalk underdrawing seems to have been a particular Venetian technique.
8. See Sara Menato, *Per la giovinezza di Carpaccio* (Padua: Padova University Press, 2016) on the importance of Antonello da Messina, Giovanni Bellini, Ferrarese painting, and other sources including Perugino, in Carpaccio’s formation.
9. I am grateful to Sara Menato for this observation.
10. Royal Collection, inv. RCIN 91280; see George Goldner, “Bellini’s Drawings,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bellini*, ed. Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 250-251.
11. See Rhoda Eitel-Porter in Cara Denison et al., *The Thaw Collection. Master Drawings and Oil Sketches. Acquisitions since 1994*, exh. cat. (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 2003), no. 1.
12. See Andrew Robison, *La poesia della luce: disegni veneziani dalla National Gallery of Art di Washington. The Poetry of Light: Venetian Drawings from the National Gallery of Art, Washington*, exh. cat. (Venice: Museo Correr, 2014), no. 9.
13. See Roger Rearick, *Il disegno veneziano del Cinquecento* (Milan: Electa, 2001), pp. 9-21 for his consideration of red chalk drawings attributed to Giorgione, with references.

