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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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A few years ago, we were fortunate enough to handle a group of drawings that had been stashed away in the library of an English country house for nearly two centuries. Granted, the dusty portfolio in which they were kept contained a mere fraction of what was once an impressive collection that even included a double-sided drawing by Raphael, now in the British Museum.



British Museum, acc. no. 1895.0915.624

The library was that of Osberton Hall in Nottinghamshire, and the gentleman collector who had assembled the books and the drawings was a certain Sir Francis Ferrand Foljambe (1750–1814). But since Sir Francis did not use a collector's mark for his drawings, we will never know the entirety of his original holdings.

Artworks that nobody has seen for nearly two centuries are undoubtedly a thrilling find—not unlike the proverbial Rembrandt in the attic. But what were the treasures in that dusty portfolio? Old master drawings are only very rarely signed. They require attribution through careful comparison with works that are either documented or otherwise firmly assigned to an artist. Hiding in remote Nottinghamshire, our sheets were left out of any art historical discourse for nearly as long as the discipline itself has been in existence. Working with them made us acutely aware, therefore, of the factor that *time* can play in the process of connoisseurship.



A considerable number of the drawings from Osberton Hall were previously owned by the English painter Jonathan Richardson Sr. (1665–1745), not only one of the greatest drawing collectors of all time, but also one of the founding fathers of modern connoisseurship as such. Stamped with his collector's mark and still laid down on their old mounts, with Richardson's characteristic (and to this date not conclusively explained) shelfmarks on their versos, those sheets also bore the artist names Richardson had assigned to them—thereby providing at least a starting point for the attribution work that needed to be done.

One of the most fascinating—yet also difficult—examples from the group is this drawing that shows the two allegorical figures of Temperance and Prudence. Richardson had ascribed it to Rubens.



Here, the difficulty, so to say, comes with the territory. Flemish drawing in the seventeenth century was dominated by the three masters Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob Jordaens, and Anthony van Dyck. The oeuvre of the latter two is fairly well outlined, and Rubens's style is of such overwhelming impact that the main issue Rubens specialists usually face is the division of hands between the master and his extended workshop. Nearly all other Flemish draftsmen of this period, however, are relegated to what one great expert in this field once called "the purgatory of anonymity."

The drawing's fascination lies in its extensive *pentimenti*, which could even suggest that two different hands might have been at work here. The first, capable but somewhat tame, elegantly rendered the two figures, using models that originate with Raphael. The figure on the right is fairly closely copied from the sibyl farthest to the left in Raphael's fresco decorating the arch in the Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria della Pace in Rome from around 1511. The source for the woman seated in the front is somewhat more obscure, but her overall pose seems to be derived from the muse seated on the right just below Apollo in Raphael's *Parnassus* in the Stanze di Raffaello in the Vatican, also painted in 1511. In a second session, the draftsman (or his master?) boldly retouched the foreground figure, adjusting her head and pulling both her legs back into a crouching position.



Richardson (and with him many other experts) saw an awareness of Rubens's art in this drawing, despite the Italian lineage of both of the figures. This would date the drawing firmly to the seventeenth century. One of the keenest eyes in this field, however, begged to differ and suggested the drawing's author may be the Antwerp painter and printmaker Frans Floris (1519/20–1570). One of Floris's very few firmly attributed drawings shows a seated female figure, long identified as the penitent Mary Magdalene but now believed to depict the mourning Cyane, a nymph who, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, dissolved herself into water out of distress that she failed to stop Pluto from kidnapping Proserpina. That sheet is part of the Weld-Blundell collection at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and was once owned by the American-born British artist Benjamin West, who was probably the one who touched it up with white heightening.



Until one finds the painting for which our drawing is preparatory, there might be no conclusive answer as to its author. Yet it is astonishing that the various scholarly opinions, while at least agreeing on the drawing's Flemish origin [big sigh of relief here!], suggest a time period for its creation that stretches over more than a century, reaching from the 1560s (Floris died in 1570) to the 1670s (Diepenbeek died in 1675, Quellinus in 1678; both are artists who have also been suggested as possible authors; a detailed account of the scholarship to date can be found in the factsheet under this link).

Flemish drawing

Print connoisseurship is usually less concerned with authorship—since in most cases this is firmly established—and more with the quality of impressions and the date of their printing. We are therefore on much firmer ground when presenting an etching by Frans Floris here.



While Floris was mainly active as a painter, he also provided numerous designs for prints that were published by Hieronymus Cock's highly prolific Antwerp publishing house Aux Quatre Vents. *Victory Surrounded by Prisoners and Trophies*, however, is Floris's only known *autograph* print. Accordingly, it is fully signed by the artist in the lower left corner and can actually be seen as the starting point of a whole tradition in which Flemish painters created designs for professional printmakers but made only a single print themselves. To do so, the painters used the technique of etching since, unlike burin engraving, it did not require extensive technical training. The artist could "draw" on a prepared printing plate by handling a stylus the same way he would handle a pen. The two other great painters who followed in this tradition were Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Rubens; Bruegel's *The Rabbit Hunt* (1560) and Rubens's *St. Catherine of Alexandria* (ca. 1620) are both etchings.

Floris used this print to advertise his own artistic talents, which he impressively demonstrated by filling the compressed space around the imposing central figure of Victoria with a multitude of writhing nudes that were inspired by Roman friezes as well as by the *ignudi* and hundreds of other muscular figures that can be found in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes. As Nadine Orenstein points out, Floris's print thereby makes "a powerful statement about the artist's authority as an interpreter of both the antique and modern art of Italy." And in the sober words of our *Neue Lagerliste* from 1969, it represents "ein wichtiges Dokument des Italianismus in den südlichen Niederlanden."

Frans Floris

