The Walter C. Baker Collection of Master Drawings

by CLAUS VIRCH Assistant Curator of European Paintings

A drawing is the most personal and delicate document of visual expression. With the easy medium of pen or pencil, brush or chalk, the artist can write down directly what he sees and what he thinks. A drawing, therefore, gives us the most intimate sight of the creative mind at work, be it a spontaneous scribble, a preparatory sketch, or a more finished composition. In today's impersonal and mechanical world we seek and delight in the quality of immediacy, of direct and private communication, which drawings offer. And the number of people who understand their subtle language is steadily increasing.

Opportunities to see drawings keep pace with this growing appreciation. More and more, they are being taken from their semi-hiding in print rooms, libraries, and private collections, and sent over land and sea to public exhibitions that follow each other with increasing frequency. More and more books and catalogues of drawings, often well illustrated, are being published, and our critical knowledge grows.

It is therefore with lively appreciation of Walter C. Baker’s generosity that the Museum is showing almost his whole collection of drawings, which so far has been known only to those privileged to see it in his apartment. The exhibition will take place in Galleries 31-34 on the second floor, from June 1 to Labor Day.

Drawings have been collected for hundreds of years. But motivation, manners of collecting, and markets have changed. In early times drawings were regarded as study material and kept in the artist's studio for the use of his pupils. We get glimpses of their being more highly prized, especially by artists, in the late fifteenth and the sixteenth century. Raphael and Dürer exchanged drawings as tokens of their mutual esteem, and Michelangelo made elaborate ones, actually finished works, as gifts for his friends. We hear of artists making as much money selling their drawings as their paintings. Probably the first collector of drawings with a historical and critical point of view was the painter Vasari, famous as an art historian and biographer of Italian artists. Vasari collected drawings systematically, pasted them in bound volumes, and assembled one of the earliest collections. He intended to illustrate the history of art by means of them.

This interest in drawings as illustrative of the development of painting lasted for centuries after

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>JUNE 1960</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Walter C. Baker Collection of Master Drawings</td>
<td>By Claus Virch 309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Cox and his Curious Toys</td>
<td>By Clare Le Corbeiller 318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prints Recently Acquired</td>
<td>By A. Hyatt Mayor 325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few but Choice: Some Recent Accessions of European Textiles</td>
<td>By Edith A. Standen 334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>309</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Adoration of the Magi, by Baccio della Porta, called Fra Bartolommeo (1472-1517), Florentine. Pen and brown ink. 11 x 9 ½ inches
As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, English collectors were remarkable for their avid predilection for drawings—a continuing national phenomenon. Charles I and the Earl of Arundel assembled two large and famous collections. They laid the foundation for the incredible wealth of drawings in England today and for a tradition of collecting that through the years has made the museums of Great Britain the world’s greatest repository of old master drawings. Comparable collections were formed in continental Europe, and from them grew treasure houses such as the Uffizi, the Louvre, and the Albertina in Vienna. These, however, could draw heavily on native genius, while England had to import most of her great treasures from across the Channel, and continued to do so until the end of the nineteenth century, when she began in turn to export some of these across the Atlantic Ocean.

Vasari’s time. Accordingly, dealers arranged them in neat albums to be sold en bloc. Old inventories and descriptions of collections and sales tantalize us with their listings of volume after volume of drawings attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci.
If princely patrons were among the first to collect drawings, rich bankers like Jabach and Crozat soon began to rival them. Along with these aristocratic and wealthy amateurs, artists themselves have always been ardent lovers of old master drawings. It is a curious fact that the most outstanding artist collectors were fashionable portrait painters who spent their high fees acquiring drawings so recklessly that they were often brought to the brink of ruin. Benefiting from the quantities of drawings amassed by his portraitist predecessors Lely and Reynolds, Sir Thomas Lawrence formed one of the most fabulous collections of all times. And in nineteenth century France splendid collections were made by Léon Bonnat and J. B. J. Wicar, less remembered today for their society portraits than for the museums in Bayonne and Lille which house their drawings and bear their names.

Today’s collector of drawings, usually not a prince, rarely a painter, often a businessman, has the same wish as the collector of the past: to acquire fine drawings. But how difficult it has become. He cannot expect to own, like Lawrence, hundreds of drawings by Rembrandt, Raphael, Rubens, and other great masters. These have largely disappeared from the market. Every day more go to museums, eager collectors themselves, and are thus forever out of his reach. Modern scholarship has added to the scarcity of old master drawings by destroying many a fancy attribution. When a drawing of the first rank comes up for sale, it is now such a rarity that its price is bound to be extremely high. Therefore today’s connoisseur cannot achieve anything like the completeness of the collections of the past. No longer buying drawings en bloc, he chooses each individual item for its appeal to his personal taste. Thus the acquisition of each is an event of importance to him.

Fig. 2. The Entombment, by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Dutch. Copy after an engraving by Mantegna. Pen and bistre, wash, over preparatory lines in red chalk, heightened with white, on Japanese paper with the arched top added to the main sheet. 11 x 15 inches
With every new drawing, Walter C. Baker has added a new dimension to his collection. With about one hundred and forty drawings, it covers a wide range. Neither concentrating on any one particular historical period or type of drawing, nor concerning himself with specialized art historical problems, Mr. Baker has simply relied on his own discerning taste and has bought what he likes. Many great draftsmen are represented here and all types of drawings are included, from quick annotations jotted down with pen or pencil—those particularly to the taste of today’s connoisseur—to the most finished and representational drawings carefully worked out in various mediums. Some are well known, having been shown in recent exhibitions; others will now be seen by the public for the first time.

When Mr. Baker bought his first drawing some ten years ago, he was already known as a collector of Greek, Roman, and Etruscan antiquities: marbles of classical serenity, rare and delightful bronzes, precious objects of silver and gold—all chosen with an exceptional feeling for their rarity and beauty. It is understandable that he could move from these to drawings, applying similar standards as to purity of line, the evocative quality of a fragment, and the magic of a masterwork. Together with his drawings we are showing some of his sculptures, not only for their own merits but also to create a feeling of the harmonious ensemble in which these objects of widely separated periods appear in their owner’s house. For, like most modern collectors, Mr. Baker is on intimate terms with his possessions. He does not store his drawings away but hangs them on his walls and often rearranges them to their best advantage, carefully selecting mats and frames that will best complement each drawing’s quality.

The small selection illustrated in these pages cannot do justice to the richness and variety of the collection. The fifteenth century drawings, precious and rare, culminate in a capital pen drawing of the Adoration of the Magi (Frontispiece) by Fra Bartolommeo, one of the most charming draftsmen of the High Renaissance in Florence. Executed with ease and delicacy, it shows the artist’s interest in arranging and balancing groups of sprightly figures. Berenson has aptly described this drawing as “a remarkable composition inspired by Leonardo and Botticelli, and most daintily penned.” The fact that it passed through some of the most distinguished English collections—those of Earl Spencer, Sir Thomas Lawrence, and Sir J. C. Robinson—under the name of Raphael may be counted as a tribute to its quality.

The seventeenth century is well represented in
the exhibition. Drawings by Annibale Carracci, Pietro da Cortona, and Rubens, with their swelling lines and baroque forms, tell of the exuberance and splendor, as well as the unrest, of that turbulent age. Poussin’s Landscape with Trees and a Tower (Figure 1) reflects this spirit with its vigorous pen and brush work and rich, deep brown wash. Poussin’s drawings, usually well balanced figure compositions, are extremely rare in this country; a landscape drawing by his hand, moreover, is of special interest. For while his conception of landscape in his paintings is classical and composed, this drawing gives, as drawings so often do, a more personal and spontaneous point of view.

Rembrandt’s drawing (Figure 2) after Mantegna’s engraving of the Entombment shows how freely the master’s creative, independent mind interpreted the Italian artist’s famous print. Rembrandt probably made this drawing around 1656, at the time of his financial reverses, when he copied some of the most beloved items in his extravagant collection before parting with them.

Connoisseurs accustomed to the rubbed look of many chalk drawings will marvel at the beautiful preservation of two large drawings by the eighteenth century Venetian artist Piazzetta; the powdery white and black chalks sparkle on the grayish paper like morning dew on a meadow. The one reproduced here (Figure 3) shows a boy feeding a brioche to a dog. Not a study for a painting, but a finished drawing intended for sale, it may represent Taste and belong to a set of drawings freely illustrating the five senses—an allegorical theme that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but was rarely treated in the eighteenth, when the four seasons or the four known continents were more frequently the subject of decorative schemes. The two sparkling pen drawings by Francesco Guardi, like fireworks at the close of a summer day, mark the end of Venice’s colorful past.

As the painter of gay fêtes champêtres, of elegant ladies in sweeping gowns accompanied by their cavaliers in shimmering silks, Watteau is for many the artistic personification of the French eighteenth century. Visitors to the exhibition may see his efforts to achieve mastery in an early copy after a landscape drawing by Campagnola which is shown beside it. A study of the nude, unusually naturalistic for Watteau, displays his highly sensitive draftsmanship at its best.

After Watteau and Boucher, the third member of the great triumvirate of French eighteenth century painting—and drawing as well—was Fragonard. Besides a beautiful landscape that

---

**Fig. 6. Lancelot Théodore, Comte de Turpin de Crissé, by J. A. D. Ingres (1780-1867), French. Pencil. 10 3/4 x 8 3/4 inches**

**Fig. 7. Seated Nude Girl, by Pierre Prud’hon (1758-1823), French. Black and white chalk on blue paper. 22 x 15 inches**
once belonged to the Fragonard connoisseur Roger Portalis, the collection includes a brush drawing of a Sultan (Figure 5) in a strikingly monumental pose. Very different from Fragonard’s often amusingly lascivious drawings, this seated man seems an eighteenth century version of Michelangelo’s Moses or of Rembrandt’s imposing self-portrait in the Frick Collection, revealing the powerful presence of an autocratic personality. The echo of the bearded and turbaned Orientals by Rembrandt or Tiepolo is not accidental: their fluid wash drawings were Fragonard’s inspiration. With a wide painterly range of tones from the most transparent to the deepest brown, and skillful use of the white of the paper, he creates an abundance of light.

The accomplished draftsmanship of Hubert Robert, Fragonard’s colleague at the French Academy in Rome, gives distinction to four luminous sanguine drawings. It is tempting to identify one of these (Figure 4), a charming scene quite exceptional in its personal quality, as a self-portrait—Robert sketching his little daughter Gabrielle-Charlotte while his wife looks over his shoulder—except that the artist in the drawing looks perhaps too young to be Robert.

The collection is especially rich in splendid nineteenth century drawings. The beauty of Prud’hon’s Seated Girl (Figure 7), with its soft and supple surface modeling, its firm plasticity, and its graceful pose, is reminiscent of Hellenistic marbles. Prud’hon made many studies like this in black and white chalk on blue paper when, late in life, he joined his pupils in drawing from the model as though a student himself. None, however, surpasses this one in its perfect balance of naturalism and classicism, of highly finished and unfinished parts, or in the placing of masses, accents, lights, and shadows.

The miraculously precise and telling but cool and unemotional pencil lines of Ingres are best seen in his portrait drawings. They are finished works in themselves, and Ingres often gave them to his sitters as tokens of friendship. Our exhibition includes two of these much-prized collectors’ items, portraits of the Comte and the Comtesse de Turpin de Crissé. Like Mr. Baker, the Comte collected both antiquities and drawings. These are now housed in the museum named after him in Angers. His portrait (Figure 6), probably made when he met Ingres in Rome in 1818, shows him young and aristocratic, almost dandyish, in a pose of easy elegance.

The high standard of drawing set by Ingres was perhaps surpassed only by Degas. His self-portrait (Figure 8), a drawing made in preparation for an etching, antedates his indebtedness to Ingres. It shows Degas as a man of twenty-two or twenty-three, with the serious searching look in his eyes that so often characterizes self-portraits of young artists. Its heavy, dark forms reflect Degas’s recent acquaintance with the work of Courbet.

Van Gogh’s drawing of suburban gardens near The Hague (Figure 9) is impressive and finished, but it conveys in its tense strokes the insistent labor with which the young artist tried to grasp the means of his craft. “I have studied

Fig. 8. Portrait of the Artist, by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), French. Black crayon, heightened with white. 11 ¾ x 9 inches
more the edge of the canal and the water in the foreground,” he wrote of this drawing, “and now the passage comes to life and expresses well, I believe, Spring and a gentle stillness.” A number of similar city views prove that Van Gogh was especially interested in perspective at this time. “Drawing becomes more and more a passion with me,” he wrote to his brother—and few people realize that he was always, even with his brush, primarily a draftsman.

Drawings by contemporary artists have been much neglected by today’s collectors. This may be due in part to the fact that few modern artists pride themselves on good draftsmanship, preferring to paint directly without preliminary study. There are exceptions, however. Mr. Baker, guided by his instinct for qualities that may be found in drawings of any period, has added to his collection of time-proven old master drawings a steadily increasing number of works by twentieth century artists, mostly American. None of them departs strikingly from tradition, none of them is nonobjective, but all show in composition and form an awareness of modern currents. Some are studies for paintings, but most are drawings for their own sake. Fresh and bold, or sensitive and studious, these works of our own time assure us that there will always be fine drawings, and that men will always love and collect them.

Fig. 9. Gardens on the Laan van Meerdervoort, by Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Dutch. Pencil, black chalk, pen and brush with black and brown ink, heightened with white tempera. 11 1/2 x 23 inches