A LATE WORK BY BAROCCI

BY MARILYN ARONBERG LAVIN

Mrs. Lavin is Curator of the Robbins Print Collection, Robbins Library, Arlington, Massachusetts.

Between the years 1603 and 1607 Federigo Barocci painted his version of the Last Supper for the chapel of the Sacrament in the cathedral of Urbino. The painting remained there until 1789, when the cathedral was partially destroyed by an earthquake and extensive repairs became necessary. The Last Supper was then taken out of the chapel, and, besides the usual damage from exposure to oil lamps and incense, moss and other ruinous growths were discovered. The decision was made to have the picture ripulito, and according to Lazzari, writing during the time of reconstruction, the cleaning was done by the painter Michele Dolci. All subsequent studies of the painting have been based on the completely repainted version. Most critics have maintained that the Last Supper gives evidence of the aging Barocci’s decline in artistic imagination, that it is cluttered with detail and oppressively ecstatic; very few have defended the painting against these criticisms (see references at the end of this article).

In 1952 the Last Supper was once more removed from its place, by the Soprintendenza alle Gallerie delle Marche, Urbino, and was thoroughly and expertly cleaned and, wherever possible, restored to its original state. It is now back on the north wall of the chapel, where, in spite of still unsatisfactory lighting, it can be seen more clearly than at any time during the three and a half centuries since it was painted. The recent cleaning has revealed painterly qualities completely hidden before and details that make it necessary to reinterpret the dramatic quality of its arrangement.

The preliminary ideas for the composition are gathered together in a wash and tempera preparatory sketch (Uffizi, no. 819; see p. 268), which contains all the salient elements of the final version. When this sketch was first published only slight changes of detail were noticed; for instance, in the hands of the angels on the left and in the man on the far left, who holds a box, while in the painting he polishes a tray. The painting, however, shows marked differences in style from the study, all of which combine to produce greater monumentality and precision. In the painting the figures have become more intensely animated, and their poses and draperies are better integrated into the over-all design. The tray-polisher in the left foreground, for example, now leans more emphatically forward, twisting so that his body forms a strong oblique line into the picture space. The child servant in front of him has taken on significance in the composition by the arrangement of his tunic, now plainly diagonal, and the added horizontal accent of his blouse. The figures in general are relatively small in the study and are dominated by the vertical emphasis, while in the painting they have grown in scale and plasticity. This is particularly evident in the area over the two doorways in the background. In the study there is enough space for putti holding medallions to recline on the broken pediments. In the painting, however, the angels that fly above the heads of the apostles have become so much larger that this space is almost completely filled and only small details of the putti are visible.

Even more telling are the changes that have taken place in the figure of the third apostle to the left of Christ. In the study his head is shown in profile and his left hand is raised in surprise. He is characteristically thin, with narrow proportions and pointed features. In the painting his head is still turned toward Christ but is in three-quarters view, and his hands are now brought together in a position of prayer. With this contrapposto the artist has revised the attitude of the figure to create a tension in which the head provides an impulse toward the center
The Last Supper, by Federigo Barocci (1535–1612), as repainted in 1789. In the cathedral of Urbino. Photograph by Alinari. See the illustration on page 269, which shows the painting restored to its original condition.

while the hands point in the opposite direction.

In addition, although the details are still quite delicate, the figure itself has become wider and more massive in physique.

A drawing for this particular figure in the Metropolitan Museum, published here for the first time, shows the kind of development involved in the monumentalizing of the painted figures. Here, the head is turned only three-quarters to the right, and so the sketch must have been made after the Uffizi study. At the left Barocci tries out the position of the apostle and tests increased dimensions for neck and shoulders. At the right he makes a detailed study of the face in three-quarters view, high-lighting the broad planes of the cheek and modeling the shadows of the neck and chin. He achieves as a result a structure as powerful as it is simple—classical in the deepest sense. Indeed the head is closely related to that of the Adam in the Creation of Man in the Sistine Chapel. The pose is all but identical, and although the features are perhaps slightly more refined in Barocci’s drawing, there is the same thrust and concentration that we find in the Adam. Thus, disregarding the late sixteenth-century conceptions of Michelangelo, Barocci returns to what was perhaps Michelangelo’s most classical moment as the source of his figure.

The sketch of praying hands between the two
A preparatory sketch by Barocci for the Last Supper. Wash and tempera. In the Uffizi Gallery, Florence

studies of heads on this sheet repeats the direction of the heads, slanting toward the right. The hands below, however, turn toward the left, establishing the tension and the pattern of light and dark that characterize the painted figure and give force and power to the entire group at the left end of the table.

One of the major results of the recent cleaning was to reveal how the tendency to monumentalize and simplify was carried into the actual painting technique. Where there had seemed to be precise forms stultified within sharp, unbreakable outlines there now appear freely painted surfaces bound only by a luminosity that closes one color area before another begins. The color also, now that it can be seen clearly, contributes to Barocci’s plan as a whole. Instead of returning, as had been believed before the cleaning, to the heavy carmines of his youth he uses an opalescent coral red and an orange-yellow, consistently counterpointed by cool gray, blue, white, and olive green. The variation of these schemes of color, each with its own subtleties of shading, creates an interplay throughout the spatial planes. Unity is achieved through the glazing, which is uniformly brilliant, whether on cool or warm colors, whether in shadow or in shining light.
This leads us to what is perhaps the most important rediscovery of all: light as one of the major elements in the dramatic organization. In the seventeenth century Bellori described the action in the center of the painting as follows: "Vi è Cristo a sedere nel Cenacolo in mezzo de' Discepoli; tiene con una mano il Divino Pane avanti al Calice, e con l'altra benedice, volgendo gli occhi al Cielo aperto in una luce con quattro Angeli, che l'adorano. Restano gli Apostoli in ammirazione." The 1789 restoration, apparently in order to emphasize the architectural details of the entablature on the back wall, painted away the whole expanse that was "aperto in una luce." Christ was thus left with his eyes raised to an empty space in the drab ceiling. The thrashing angels seemed to hang heavily around him, intruders in an otherwise human event. But now it can be seen that, far from being empty, the upper part of the room is filled with a glowing, heavenly light. The rapport between Christ and the luminous presence explains and justifies the intensity of his glance. The angels are animated by the light, which thus makes their participation meaningful. At the same time the strong accent above (already apparent in the Uffizi study) relaxes what had been an almost too obvious convergence on the figure of Christ. The
Details of the sketch and the painting, showing the figure that appears in the drawing on the opposite page.

Below: Head of Adam, from Michelangelo’s fresco of the Creation of Man on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

center of interest now, in significance as well as in composition, is spread to the upper regions of the room and into the divine experience. Barocci has actually made an addition to the iconography of the Last Supper, the presence of the Holy Ghost.

REFERENCES