A Portrait Drawing of Pope Paul V Attributed to Guido Reni

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A recurring topos in the artists’ biographies of the 16th and 17th centuries is that of the accomplished painter declining to paint the portrait of a prince. The justification is usually a one-liner to the effect that even portraits of kings and popes are unworthy subjects for a real artist, since realistic reproduction of nature ranks lower in the hierarchy of artistic genres than idealised history painting. In his 1678 biography of Guido Reni (1575–1642), Carlo Cesare Malvasia writes that, despite promises of handsome remuneration, Reni declined to paint the French king “because he was not a portrait painter”, but adds that there are nevertheless several portraits by his hand. Malvasia mentions those of the artist’s mother and brother and of another person, and a series of portraits of princes of the Church: “Clement [VIII], Paul V, his nephew Cardinal Scipione [Borghese], Cardinal Sfondrati, Cardinal Senesio [Sannesio] . . . Cardinals Spada and Sacchetti”. The full-length seated portrait of Cardinal Bernardino Spada (Galleria Spada, Rome) is the only one of the works enumerated that has been identified with certainty, although an image of a widow.

in the Pinacoteca in Bologna has long been referred to as “the artist’s mother”. A painting of Cardinal Camillo Borghese currently on the British art market has been ascribed to Reni, citing support from several scholars (Fig. 1). In 2016, the Nationalmuseum acquired a portrait drawing attributed to Reni representing the same sitter, but made after Borghese had ascended the papal throne as Paul V in May 1605 (Fig. 2). Here, Borghese has exchanged the cardinal’s biretta of the painting for a camauro, a red velvet cap trimmed with white fur that was worn only by the pope.

Executed in black chalk with white highlights on bluish-grey paper, the Nationalmuseum’s portrait is a characteristic example of a manner of drawing that flourished in Rome at the beginning of the 17th century. The great prestige project of the turn of the century in that city was the decoration of the Galleria of the Palazzo Farnese. The work was led by Annibale Carracci, with the assistance of several younger artists who had studied at the Carracci family’s school of painting in their home city of Bologna. The many preparatory drawings for the Farnese Galleria are largely executed in black chalk on coloured paper, a medium that was adopted by both the Bolognese painters in Carracci’s immediate circle and contemporary Roman artists. The younger generation of artists with roots in Bologna and the surrounding countryside of Emilia who had flocked to Rome for Carracci’s project were to dominate painting in Rome in the early decades of the 17th century. Among them was Guido Reni, although he had established an independent career before leaving Bologna. Reni’s first patron in Rome was Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrati (whose portrait he also painted, according to Malvasia; cf. note 1), and his commissions for Sfondrati in the latter’s titular church of S. Cecilia were his entry ticket to the Roman art scene. It would be some time, though, before the Borghese family began in earnest to engage the services of the

Fig. 1 Attributed to Guido Reni (1575–1642), Cardinal Camillo Borghese (Future Paul V). Oil on canvas. The Matthiesen Gallery, London (photo: Matthiesen Gallery).
The portrait drawing of Paul V was previously ascribed to Domenichino, but was acquired with an attribution to Reni that seems entirely plausible, for one thing in view of the historical circumstances.\(^5\) Stylistically, there are few exact comparisons, as drawn portraits by Reni scarcely exist, but one characteristic of the artist is the sketchy manner of drawing the folds of the clothing with firm, often parallel, chalk strokes, forming marked angles in a kind of zigzag pattern. Parallels can be found, for instance, in drawings for images of saints, including a St Dominic and a bishop saint (with a headdress indicated in a similar fashion) in the Louvre.\(^6\) The way of drawing the white collar in white bodycolour also has counterparts in both the examples mentioned and others. On the reverse of the mount is a modern
inscription claiming that the Nationalmuseum drawing is by Ottavio Leoni (c. 1578–1630), a prominent and productive portrait draughtsman in Rome in the first decades of the 17th century. Although there are certain similarities to Leoni’s black- and red-chalk drawings of prelates from the 1620s, they are different in manner, and the Nationalmuseum’s head of a pope fills the picture space more than Leoni’s head-and-shoulders portraits. We find an interesting parallel, however, in a portrait in black chalk of Camillo Borghese as a cardinal in the Morgan Library and Museum, New York (I, 24), catalogued as Ottavio Leoni, but different in character from and focusing more clearly on the head and facial features than the drawn and engraved bust-length images for which Leoni is chiefly known (Fig. 3). It was drawn an estimated ten years before the Nationalmuseum’s portrait of Camillo Borghese, in which the beard is thinner and whiter. The Morgan drawing’s rendering of the sitter’s features is close to that found in the painted portrait of Cardinal Borghese (see note 2).

In the Nationalmuseum portrait, the facial features and beard are drawn with short, faint touches of chalk, heightened with white. As a portrait of a reigning pope, it is almost unique in its direct characterisation, was undoubtedly drawn from life, and is free from the conventions requiring that the pope be portrayed with a stern gravity, which were followed without exception in the official portraits in various media that were widely circulated (Fig. 4). Here, the sharp-minded lawyer and tough administrator Paul V has an expression of forbearance, with an enquiring gaze and a slight smile on his lips. When elected pope in 1605, Borghese was comparatively young, 52, and there are no obvious signs yet of corpulence that is apparent in Bernini’s bust from the end of his pontificate (1617–1620, Galleria Borghese). A dating between 1605 and 1608 seems likely. The earlier year is suggested by the sitter’s appearance; the later one by the evidence of direct contact between the pope and Reni, who began work at that time on the decoration of the Quirinal Palace.

Notes:
1. Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Felsina Pittrice, Bologna 1841 (1678), II, p. 47. In addition, according to Malvasia, Reni painted a number of portraits of poets and others which he gave to the sitters.
6. Cf. also a study of an elderly woman, inv. 8919.
7. Several examples can be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum and at Downing College, Cambridge.
8. It was drawn an estimated ten years before the Nationalmuseum’s portrait of Camillo Borghese, in which the beard is thinner and whiter. The Morgan drawing’s rendering of the sitter’s features is close to that found in the painted portrait of Cardinal Borghese (see note 2).
10. Several examples can be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum and at Downing College, Cambridge.
11. The Morgan drawing is uncharacteristic when compared with the rest of Leoni’s oeuvre, but, if the attribution is correct, it would predate most of his known works. Published by Pepper and Matthiesen (2017, p. 61) as attributed to Leone Leoni (d. 1590), which is inconceivable (and perhaps a simple error), as Borghese was not made a cardinal until 1596.