

The Divinity of Detail: Raphael and Johann Gotthard Müller

By Christian Rümelin

During the 18th century, regular discussions about prints occurred between engravers and the people commissioning the work, mostly about overall appearance and quality of execution and/or the terms of payment.¹ One case, however, stands out for what it reveals about the visual interpretation of one of the most praised artworks of the time—Raphael's *Madonna della Seggiola* (1513–1514)—and because of the light it sheds on the minute observations, comparisons and modifications that went into ambitious reproductive engraving.

In April 1794 Johann Gotthard Müller, a renowned academic engraver from Stuttgart, wrote a critique of Raphael Morghen's engraving after the painting, which had been published the previous year. A few years later, when Müller was himself commissioned to reproduce the *Madonna della Seggiola*, he corresponded closely with his son, Johann Friedrich Wilhelm—later a well-known academic engraver in his own right—on the correcting of three trial proofs.²

Müller's first examination of Morghen's print took place before he came to know the painting itself, but he criticized Morghen's manner of representing hair as mechanical and his treatment of the garments with small dots, rather than a variety of lines, as monotonous.³ Morghen's image, however, set the standard against which Müller would compete when, during an 1802 sojourn in Paris, he was asked to reproduce the same painting for the *Musée français*. Before returning to Stuttgart Müller made some sketches of the painting to supplement the drawing by André Dutertre that the publishers⁴ had provided.

In December 1803 Müller sent the first trial proof to his son Friedrich in Paris. Two further proofs followed over the summer. Though Friedrich was obviously proud of this father's work, he took the task of improving the print seriously and responded with open and well-observed criticisms. In a letter dated January 1804, Friedrich emphasized that the overall appearance had been



Left: Johann Gotthard von Müller, detail from *La Madonna della Sedia* (late 18th–early 19th century), engraving. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Right: Raphael Morghen, detail from *La Madonna della Sedia* (late 18th–early 19th century), engraving, plate 42.3 × 36.5 cm, sheet 64 × 50 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of William Gray from the collection of Francis Calley Gray, G2760. Photo: Imaging Department ©President and Fellows of Harvard College.

acclaimed by the publishers and other engravers,⁵ but made some general suggestions: he thought certain hatchings, such as those on Saint John's left cheek, should be more curved while the ones on the Virgin's sleeve should be engraved with greater elegance; one of Saint John's fingers seemed wrong and the forearm of Jesus appeared too heavy; most importantly, the circle around the image should be enlarged to provide more space above the head of the Virgin.

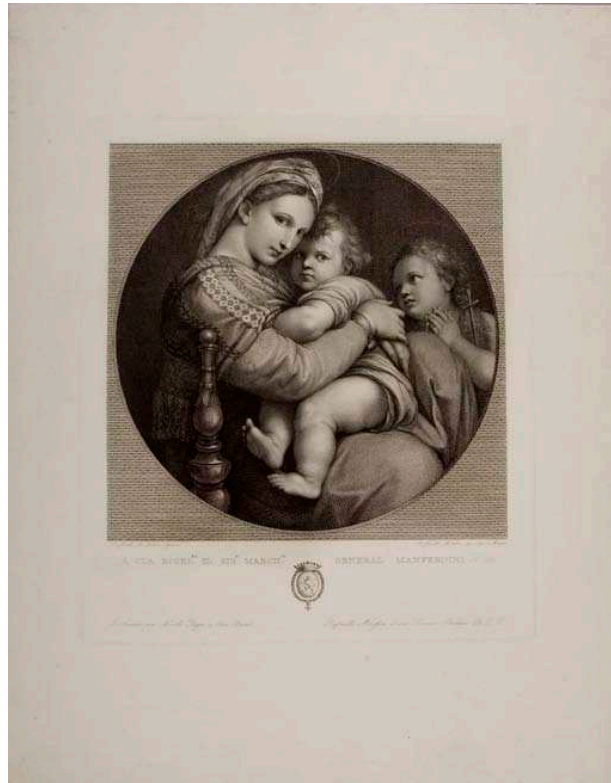
When a new trial proof was made and sent, Friedrich replied with a degree of detail that borders on the extreme.⁶ He starts by saying that examining the print gave him immense pleasure but that—probably out of jealousy—the draughtsman Dutertre remarked that the Virgin seemed to squint. Friedrich disagreed, but observed that the left inner eyelid was slightly too closed against the nose; this effect might disappear if the outline of the nose were rounded. Although the left foot of Jesus was marvelously engraved, the knuckle of the left index finger of the Virgin was far too high and should be lowered and the fingernail should be shorter. At the middle finger the fingernail should not reach the fingertip at all. The right thumb of Saint John was too

small, as seen in profile. Concerning the curl over the veil, Friedrich suggested that the light was too close to the curl's shadow, resulting in a loss of volume.

A few days later, Friedrich, accompanied by the print's publishers, was able to compare the print with the original painting. This visit resulted in several pages of astonishingly minute observations that addressed details ranging from the angle of the hairline to the form of fingernails, wrinkles, lips, tip of the Virgin's nose; to the form and distribution of tiny shadows, eyes and eyelids; to a suggestion that a fine line should occasionally be used between bolder ones (in particular for the dress on the thigh of the Virgin). To underline and clarify his points, Friedrich touched up the proof and returned it to his father.

In September, when Friedrich received the third trial proof, he first criticized the printer for using too much ink and not stirring it enough to obtain a homogenous paste.⁷ He then took up specific points, referring again to the light on the thigh of the Virgin, the cheeks of Jesus and St. John, the lips, and some tiny shadows that appeared either too strong or too weak.

This rare discussion between two pro-



Left: Johann Gotthard von Müller, *La Madonna della Sedia* (late 18th–early 19th century), engraving. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London. **Right:** Raphael Morghen, *La Madonna della Sedia* (late 18th–early 19th century), engraving, plate 42.3 x 36.5 cm, sheet 64 x 50 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of William Gray from the collection of Francis Calley Gray, G2760. Photo: Imaging Department ©President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Professional academic engravers illuminates the criteria of appreciation they employed and the meticulousness with which they adjusted the image to achieve the final result. The competition was set when Morghen published his version, and clearly the whole discussion aimed to surpass him, with a more accurate, detailed and harmonious print. This aim, to judge by contemporary reactions, was fully met. ■

Christian Rümelin is Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva.

Notes:

1. Many of these contracts have been published in the past. For a general overview see: Robert Verhoogt, Art in Reproduction: Nineteenth-century Prints after Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Jozef Israëls and Ary Scheffer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), especially chapter 2.
2. For a more detailed discussion, the older literature and all sources see my remarks in Christian Rümelin, Johann Gotthard Müller (1747–1830) und das Stuttgarter Kupferstecherei-Institut:

- mit einem Werkverzeichnis der Druckgraphik von Johann Gotthard Müller (1740–1830) und Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Müller (1782–1816) (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2000), 64–67 and cat. 30.
3. See the letter by Müller to the Nuremberg-based publisher and print dealer Johann Friedrich Frauenholz, dated 18 April 1794 (Freies Deutsches Hochstift, Frankfurt, reference 3746).
4. Pierre Laurent and Louis Nicolas Joseph Robillard-Péronville.
5. See the letter by Johann Friedrich Wilhelm to his father, dated 2 January 1804 (State Archives, Stuttgart, reference J 50 Büschel 55).
6. See the letters by Friedrich to his father, dated 11 July 1804 and 31 July 1804 (both State Archives, Stuttgart, reference J 50 Büschel 55). Both letters are several pages long.
7. See the letter by Friedrich to his father, dated 22 Sept 1804 (State Archive, Stuttgart, reference J 50 Büschel 55).