

A CLASSICAL SOURCE FOR A DRAWING BY PARMIGIANINO: A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF THE FLORENTINE NIOBID

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The problem of Parmigianino's response to the classical world in his drawings has yet to be given a detailed analysis.¹ Although rarely exhibiting an antiquarian's exactitude for detail, a number of the artist's drawings illustrate his response to antiquity, however. With reference to those drawings that draw their inspiration from classical examples, I would like to offer some new insights.

In the second edition of Vasari's *Vite* (1568), we learn of the initial distinguished reception of the young Parmigianino as a worthy descendant of Raphael upon Parmigianino's visit to the court of Clement VII in Rome where he stayed from 1524 to 1527.² As recorded by Vasari, the intentions of the artist, a native of Parma, in going to Rome may be characteristic of the time: "Ma tornando a Francesco, egli studiando in Roma volle vedere tutte le cose antiche e moderne così di scultura come di pittura che erano in quella città; ma in somma venerazione ebbe particolarmente quelle di Michelagnolo Buonarotti e di Raffaello da Urbino."³ Thus, according to Vasari, the young Parmigianino was influenced by the modern *maniera* of Raphael and Michelangelo as well as the sculptures of antiquity.⁴

Unfortunately, the biographical particulars of Parmigianino's trip to Rome as well as his drawing activity, which encompasses his study of antiquity, continues to elude us.⁵ Following his flight after the sack of

Rome in 1527, Parmigianino resided in Bologna until 1531 and was the leading contemporary painter there; he brought a "vero uso del gratoso, et Eccellente dipignere, et dissegnare" to an area seen by contemporaries as artistically provincial.⁶ Vasari asserts that Parmigianino's first work to be completed in Bologna—around 1527/28—was the "Pala di San Rocco" in San Petronio for the former chapel of the Bonsignori family.⁷ This work, a personal votive picture of its patron, Baldassare or Fabrizio da Milano, ended up in the private chapel in the wake of the plague of 1527.⁸ In connection with the altar picture, a number of sketches exist and have already been the object of art-historical analysis.⁹ The genesis of the sketches of the saintly protector against the plague, Saint Roch, who bears the traditional wound on the upper thigh, a result of the plague,¹⁰ shows, in the case of the altarpiece by Parmigianino, the transformation from a standing to a kneeling figure.

A sheet worked on both sides in pen and brown ink, located in the Louvre, casts light on both the form and content of the new conception that followed a series of sketches for a standing figure.¹¹ On the sheet's initially executed verso (Fig. 1), which is to be the focal point of this inquiry, the saint is kneeling on his right knee. He leans with the right upper half of his body on a stone. A swiftly sketched greyhound stands in the foreground. The



Fig. 1 Parmigianino, study for *Saint Roch*, verso. 20 × 14.8 cm.
Louvre, Paris

saint's left leg is spread out away from his body so that only the ball of his left foot touches the ground. With the gesture of his left hand, Saint Roch directs attention to the darkened plague-boil as the source of unyielding human suffering. The rest of the saint's upper body, as it is portrayed in the Louvre sketch, is similar to the execution carried out in the altar painting. The strong affection and the imploring look toward heaven link the drawing to the final execution in the altarpiece. The unique *invenzione* of the kneeling posture as an expression of physical suffering represents, I contend, a reworking of a classical model. Parmigianino's sketch appears to posit an early example of a response to the *Dying Son of Niobe* (Fig. 2), today in the Uffizi.¹²

The sculpture is a well-preserved Roman copy of a Hellenistic original, whose dating in the first or third century B.C. remains highly controversial. Direct knowledge of the *Dying Son of Niobe* in sixteenth-century Rome is confirmed by several sources. The evidence strongly suggests that the sketch by Parmigianino reproduces the Niobid for the Saint Roch altarpiece, although the sketch is a mirror image of the original. Parmigianino transposes in his sketch the similarly wrought classical model, where the figure has one leg spread out from the body and expresses dire pain. The hip section as well as the bend of the upper body in the representation of Saint Roch appear to have been inspired by the similar construction of the Niobid, who also leans on a stone. The imploring look of the Niobid to heaven, from where Apollo fires the deadly arrows, is equally captured in the sketch by Parmigianino. The *Dying Niobid* that concerns us here was known as a Roman copy before the complete group

of Niobids was discovered in 1583 on the Esquiline Hill in Rome.¹³

Because contemporary responses to the curious figure were infrequent, artistic reproductions were also rare. A sketch, dated c. 1550, attributed to Girolamo da Carpi (Fig. 3), who was in Rome from 1549 to 1553, shows the mentioned replica of the *Dying Son of Niobe*.¹⁴ The drawing from the Uffizi shows the complete sculpture along with two further sketches in the characteristic precision of da Carpi's antiquarian studies. The learned Bolognese Ulisse Aldrovandi mentions the *Niobid* in his guide to the classical statues of Rome, written in Rome between 1549 and 1550. Aldrovandi's guide appeared in print for the first time in 1556.¹⁵ Before the successful excavations of 1583, the actual iconographical meaning of the *Niobid* remained hidden to the antiquarians of the cinquecento. But the rich expression of the figure was seen as a prototype of bodily pain. According to Aldrovandi, the sculpture, located around 1550 in the collection of della Valle-Rustici in Rome,¹⁶ was generally interpreted to be the son of Laocoön: "Prima, che s'entri ne la sala del palagio, si troua una statua inginocchiata con un ginocchio, mira in su col uolto, ha una mano col pugno chiuso sopra la coscia dritta; l'altra tiene stesa sopra un tronco, sul quale è la sua ueste riposta. Dicono che ella sia un de' figliuoli di Laocoonte."¹⁷ Although the *Dying Son of Niobe* was, in an archaeological sense, incorrectly identified, the sculpture, removed from the complete group of Niobids, was read as a depiction of a death struggle. Indicative of this interpretation is the earliest example of an artistic response by the school of Giulio Romano, which shows an adaption of the

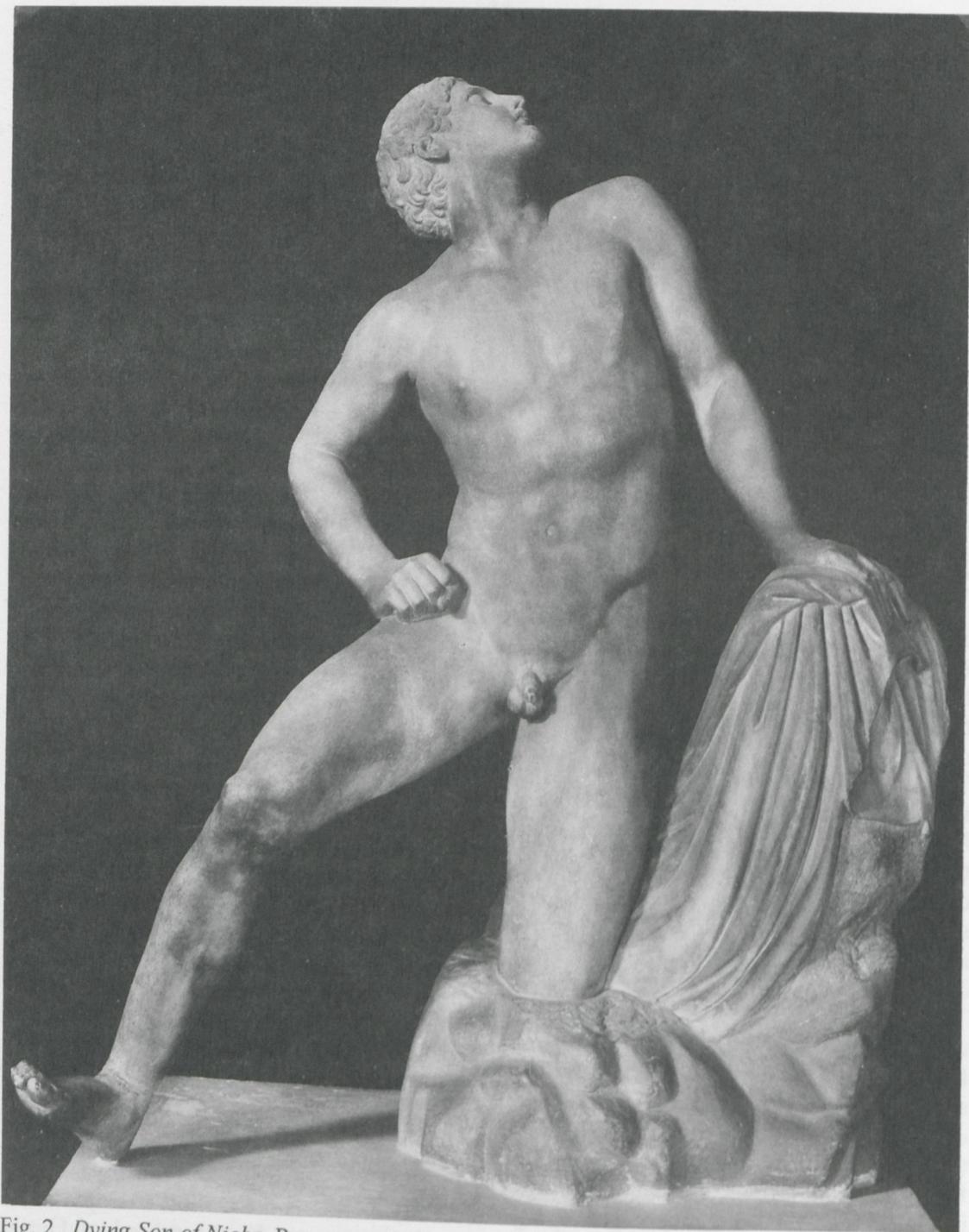


Fig. 2 *Dying Son of Niobe*, Roman copy of a Hellenistic sculpture. Marble; height: 124 cm. Uffizi, Florence

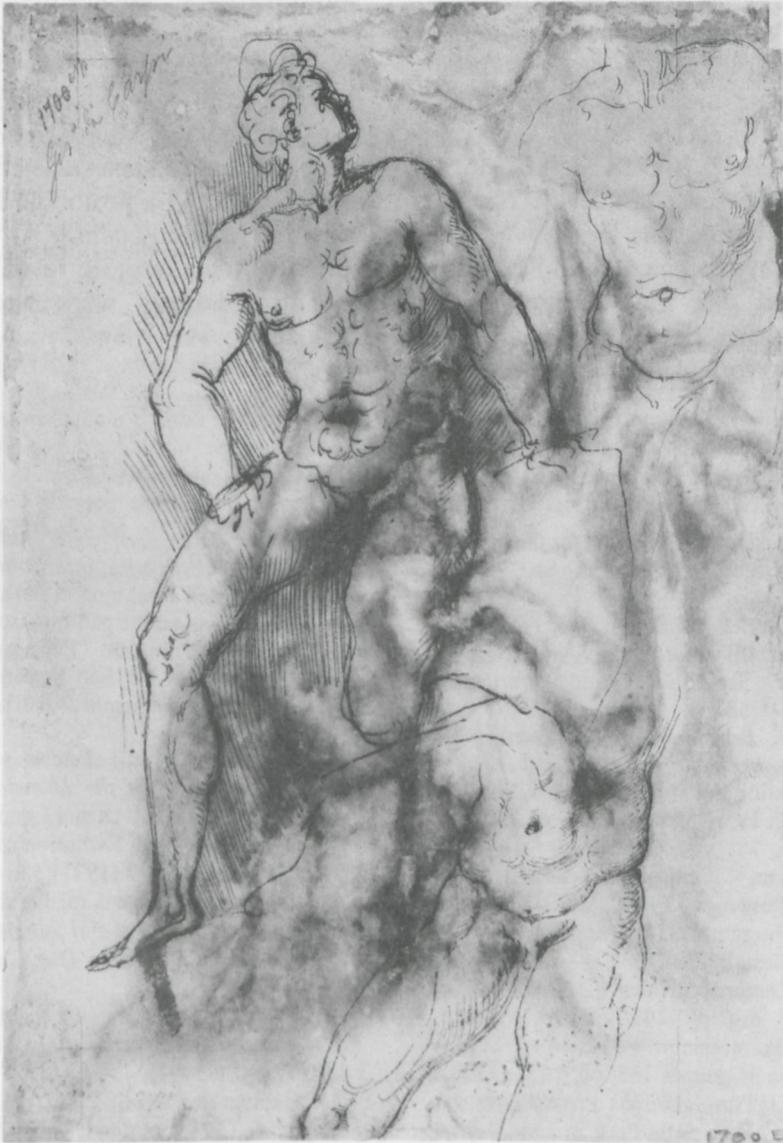


Fig. 3 Girolamo da Carpi, drawing after the *Dying Son of Niobe*. c. 1550. Uffizi, Florence

sculpture for a portrayal of the dying son of Laocoön. Following Giulio's sketch, his assistant, Rinaldo Mantovano, executed the fresco portraying the *Death of Laocoön* in the Sala di Troia at the ducal palace of Mantua around 1536 to 1540.¹⁸ The pronounced similarities of the left son of Laocoön with the sculpture of the Niobid coincide in the case of the fresco with the content of its tragic scene. Giulio Romano, who was primarily in Mantua after 1524, most likely sketched the sculpture while he was in Rome prior to his appointment as

court painter in Mantua. I would argue that Parmigianino's drawing may be seen as a further example in the history of the reception of that figure. It is possible that Parmigianino drew his orientation for the portrayal of the suffering Saint Roch from a sculpture that had been classified as the son of Laocoön and a prototype for the representation of bodily pain.¹⁹ As the final execution of the altarpiece reveals, this phase of Parmigianino's work was merely an episode.

NOTES

I would like to thank John P. Wiggins for the translation and for the useful discussion of the text.

1. Compare the brief mention in S. J. Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1950), p. 67. See also C. Gould, *Parmigianino* (Milan: 1994), p. 58.

2. Cf. G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, 6 vols. (Florence: 1966–1987), IV, p. 535.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 536.

4. D. Ekserdjian, "Parmigianino and Michelangelo," *Master Drawings* 31 (1993):390–394.

5. For selected literature on Parmigianino's stay in Rome, see A. Chastel, *The Sack of Rome, 1527*, A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1977 (Princeton: 1983), esp. pp. 149–178; M. Vaccaro, "Documents for Parmigianino's 'Vision of St. Jerome,'" *Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1078 (1993): 22–27; A. Gnann, "Parmigianinos Projekte für die Cesi-Kapelle in S. Maria della Pace in Rom," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 59, no. 3 (1996): 360–380.

6. Cf. G. B. Armenini, *De' veri precetti della pittura di M. Gio. Battista Armenini da Faenza libri tre* (Ravenna: 1587), pp. 217–219.

7. Vasari, IV, p. 539.

8. On the indefinite identification of the donor, compare, among others, P. Lamo, *Graticola di Bo-*

logna ossia descrizione delle pitture, sculture e architetture di detta città fatta l'anno 1560 del pittore Pietro Lamo (Bologna: 1844), p. 38. For detailed information on the painting, see Freedberg, pp. 74 ff.; also M. Thimann, "Parmigianinos Rochusaltar: Ein Pestvotiv für San Petronio in Bologna," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 61, no. 3 (1998): 410–419.

9. For literature on the sketches to date, see A. E. Popham, *Catalogue of the Drawings of Parmigianino*, 3 vols. (New Haven and London: 1971), I, pp. 17 f.; G. Neufeld, "The Evolution of Parmigianino's St. Roch," *Pantheon* 29 (1971):326–328; S. Béguin, "A propos de deux dessins inédits du Parmesan," in *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Paintings in Honor of Millard Meiss* (New York: 1977), pp. 54–60.

10. For an introduction to the history of Saint Roch, see A. Niero, *San Rocco: Storia, leggenda, culto* (Vicenza: 1991).

11. Cabinet des Dessins, inv. no. 6397. Compare Popham, no. 377 recto and verso; Neufeld, p. 326; Béguin, p. 57. For the recto, see also R. Bacou, *Dessins de l'Ecole de Parme: Corrège, Parmesan*, exh. cat. (Paris: Louvre, 1964), p. 61.

12. Inv. no. 289. For a discussion of research, see G. A. Mansuelli, *Galleria degli Uffizi: Le sculture, I* (Rome: 1958), pp. 101 ff.; on the *Niobide caduto sul ginocchio sinistro*, see p. 117, no. 78.

13. See P. P. Bober and R. Rubinstein, *Renaiss-*

sance *Artists and Antique Sculpture* (London: 1986), p. 138. The main group of the Niobids, numbering fourteen or fifteen, was excavated in the spring of 1583 in the Vigna Tommasini on the Esquiline Hill. See E. Mandowsky, "Some Notes on the Early History of the Medicean 'Niobides,'" *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 41 (1953):252–264. The group of sculptures ended up in the possession of the Medici family and was transported to Florence in 1770. Single figures were already known in replica form before 1583, as several illustrations and descriptions clearly reveal.

14. Inv. no. 1700. See A. Serafini, *Girolamo da Carpi: Pittore e architetto ferrarese 1501–1556* (Rome: 1915), fig. 138.

15. U. Aldrovandi, *Delle statue antiche che per tutta Roma in diuersi luoghi & case si ueggono*, in Lucio Mauro, *Le antichità della città di Roma breuissimamente raccolte da chiunque ne ha scritto ò antico ò moderno* (Venice: 1556); here the edition from Venice (1562) was used, p. 215. On the author,

see, among others, *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, II (Rome: 1960), pp. 118–124. On the origin and printing of Aldrovandi's guidebook, see *Archäologie der Antike: Aus den Beständen der Herzog August Bibliothek, 1500–1700*, ed. M. Daly Davis, exh. cat., Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, 1994 (Wiesbaden: 1994), p. 118.

16. Aldrovandi, p. 212: "In casa di Mon. il vescouo de' Rustici, edificata già dal Cardinale de la valle suo zio; ne la contrada de la valle."

17. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

18. Cf. F. Hartt, *Giulio Romano* (New Haven: 1958), p. 161. On the reception of the Niobid in the work of Giulio Romano, compare E. Wiemann, *Der Mythos von Niobe und ihren Kindern: Studien zur Darstellung und Rezeption* (Worms: 1986), p. 144.

19. See L. D. Ettliger, "Exemplum Doloris: Reflections on the Laocoön Group," in *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: 1961), pp. 121–126.