

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. LAWRENCE BY LAZZARO TAVARONE. AN UNKNOWN STUDY IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY IN PRAGUE

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ABSTRACT

Lazzaro Tavarone is considered one of the most important exponents of Genoese painting between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He was a very prolific draftsman and drawing played a very important role in his work. One of his hitherto unknown drawings is kept in the Drawings and Prints Cabinet of the National Gallery in Prague. It is a preparatory study for the fresco in the choir of the Genoa cathedral. The drawing depicts the *Martyrdom of San Lorenzo*. The article introduces the reader to the examination of the design and the culture in which the work is placed.

KEYWORDS: Lazzaro Tavarone; St. Lawrence; Genoa; Martyrdom of St. Lawrence; Prague.

*Il Martirio di San Lorenzo di Lazzaro Tavarone. Un disegno preparatorio
sinora sconosciuto conservato nella Galleria Nazionale di Praga*

ABSTRACT

Lazzaro Tavarone è considerato uno dei più importanti esponenti della pittura genovese a cavallo tra Cinquecento e Seicento. Fu un disegnatore molto prolifico e il disegno ha un ruolo molto importante nel suo lavoro. Un suo disegno finora sconosciuto è conservato nel Gabinetto disegni e stampe della Galleria Nazionale di Praga. Si tratta di uno studio preparatorio per l'affresco nel coro della cattedrale di Genova. Il disegno raffigura *Il Martirio di San Lorenzo*. L'articolo introduce il lettore all'esame del disegno e alla cultura in cui l'opera si colloca.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Lazzaro Tavarone; San Lorenzo; Genova; Martirio di San Lorenzo; Praga

«Vivranno sempre immortali, tuttochè nati in bassa fortuna, quegli uomini, che eccellenti d'ingegno, valorosamente l'impiegarono; onde ne trasmisero alle posterità segnalate memorie ne' lor nobilissimi parti [...]. Quest'opera sul fresco [*The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*], ma che sembra dipinta ad olio, tanta è la sua forza, ed armonica tempra, ha fatto stupire i più illuminati Pittori stranieri, che l'hanno veduta. Solamente ha avuto a' nostri giorni la disgrazia d'essere stata ripresa, come dura, e di nessun garbo da Mr. Couchin: se pure è disgrazia l'essere ripreso da critici ignoranti, il cui capitale è unicamente fondato sull'arroganza»¹. With these words Carlo Giuseppe Ratti described Lazzaro Tavarone in his famous treatise devoted to Genoese artists. Although Tavarone's artistic output is overshadowed by the work of his more famous teacher, many studies relating to his work as a painter and draughtsman have been published ever since the 1960s, testifying to his remarkable talent and thus confirming the biographer's words.

Lazzaro Tavarone (1556–1641) is one of the most important Genoese painters from the late 16th and early 17th centuries². He spent the years of his apprenticeship in the workshop of Luca Cambiaso³. This experience was of fundamental importance for him. He was influenced by his master to such an extent that many researchers consider him to be Cambiaso's most faithful

This article was published with the support of the Grant for the Long-Term Conceptual Development of the Research Organization of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic.

¹ Soprani, Ratti, 1768, I, pp. 143, 148–150.

² Newcome-Schleier 1989a, p. 27; inoltre Newcome-Schleier 1982, pp. 30–37; Newcome-Schleier 1985, pp. 29–34, nos. 19–23; Newcome-Schleier 2000, p. 157; *La pittura in Liguria* 1999, pp. 413–414.

³ Soprani, Ratti, 1768, I, p. 144.



1, Lazzaro Tavarone, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1622, Metropolitan Cathedral of Saint Lawrence, Genova

The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence (fig. 1), and several medallions surrounding the central scene⁸.

One of the most important texts which spread awareness of the life and martyrdom of St. Lawrence in the past was the *Legenda Aurea*, written by the Archbishop of Genoa, Jacopo da Varazze (1228–1298). In the passage devoted to the saint's martyrdom, Jacopo describes the scene as follows: « *And the ministers despoiled him (St. Lawrence), and laid him stretched out upon a gridiron of iron, and laid burning coals under [...]. And after this he said with a glad cheer unto Decius, Thou cursed wretch, thou hast roasted that one side, turn that other, and eat. And then he, rendering thankings to our Lord, said: I thank thee, Lord Jesu Christ, for I have deserved to*

pupil⁴. In 1583 Cambiaso travelled to the Spanish court at the invitation of Philip II (1527–1568). His son Orazio and Lazzaro Tavarone went there from Genoa with him. Tavarone remained in Spain until 1592⁵, when he returned to his native Genoa⁶.

His lengthy stay on the Pyrenean peninsula influenced Tavarone's artistic style. This can clearly be seen, for example, in the frescoes in the Palazzo Spinola and in the Villa Doria de Pegli⁷. The influence of the works he encountered in the residence of the Spanish kings is also revealed in one of the most prestigious commissions that Tavarone received in the whole of his life – the decorative painting in the choir of the Cathedral of St. Lawrence in Genoa. This project included the decoration of the apse, depicting *St. Lawrence Presenting the Treasures of the Church to the Emperor*, a fresco on the vault of the presbytery with the theme of

⁴ Caraceni Poleggi 1970, p. 237.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ One of his most important commissions in Spain was the decoration of the Royal apartments in El Escorial. Orazio Cambiaso, Fabrizio Castello, and Nicola Granello worked with him on this project. In addition to his decorative work as a painter, his presence and activities in Spain are documented by a number of payments to be found in the archives. In Suida Manning, Suida 1958, pp. 281–284.

⁷ Newcome-Schleier 1989b, p. 898.

⁸ The commission was completed in 1622. The date is given in the bottom left-hand corner of the fresco: "LAZARVS TAVARONVS F. MDCXXII".

*enter into thy gates*⁹. The portrayal of the scene on the ceiling of the presbytery in Genoa Cathedral corresponds to these words. Inspiration for the painting, however, is also to be found in famous works from the past, for a number of compositional details and iconographical motifs of the scene draw on the rich tradition of the artistic representation of this theme. Just as in many other portrayals of Lawrence's death, the Emperor is also present in the Genoese fresco, looking on at the saint's martyrdom. Further evidence of iconographic connections with older portrayals can be found in the statue of a pagan god, which Tavarone positioned in the composition as a counterbalance to the Emperor Decius¹⁰.

The prevailing view is that Tavarone found inspiration for his work on the ceiling of the choir of the Genoese cathedral in Cambiaso's Spanish output¹¹. In this connection, reference is usually made to the painting in the Sala de Capas in El Escorial, which Cambiaso supplied to the Spanish court two years before he left for Spain. Certain parallels, especially in relation to the preparatory drawing (fig. 2), cannot be overlooked¹². There appear to be similarities between the figure of the



2, Luca Cambiaso, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, 1581, Pen and brown ink with brown wash, National Gallery of Art, Washington, inv. 1971.80.2

court servant who is seen in Tavarone's fresco to the left of the gridiron raking the coals and the figure holding down the saint's body with a fork in Cambiaso's drawing in the National Gallery of Art. Although I can see a certain similarity between the two figures, this is not, in my view, an unequivocal argument proving a connection between the two works. If we are to mention here works which may have influenced Tavarone in creating the Genoese fresco, then we cannot overlook the Spanish version of Titian's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*. Titian was commissioned by the Spanish King Philip II to make this painting for the monumental altar in the Church of

⁹ Jakub de Voragine 1998, p. 219.

¹⁰ This motif was not thematically codified in Renaissance and Baroque art. Titian, in his famous paintings in El Escorial and the Chiesa dei Gesuiti in Venice chose the goddess Vesta; Palma Il Giovane, in a painting in the Chiesa di San Giacomo dall'Orto, depicted the god Mars; and Giambettino Cignaroli chose Venus (Church of San Lorenzo, Brescia). Most frequently portrayed, however, was the ruler of the gods, Jove. He can be seen in paintings by Orazio Borgianni (Museo de la Real Colegiata, Roncesvalles), and by Peter Paul Rubens (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

¹¹ Caraceni Poggi 1970, p. 298; Rutteri 1968, p. 139.

¹² *Master drawings* 1978, pp. 46-47; Olszewski 2000, p. 29.



3, Cornelis Cort after Tiziano Vecellio, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1571, Engraving, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 49.97.537

a very important means of artistic expression.¹⁵ His relationship to drawings is mentioned a number of times in his biography. The author of *Vite de pittori, scultori, ed architetti Genovesi* records how Tavarone saved many of Cambiaso's drawings from being burnt¹⁶. From Soprani and Ratti we also know that Tavarone's extensive collection of drawings was a source of consolation to him when he retired from active work¹⁷. The indispensable role played by drawing in the painter's life is likewise testified to by the large number of works attributed to him which have been preserved in Italian, European, and American institutions. These include several studies relating to the Genoese cathedral.

St. Lawrence in El Escorial. Because of the lighting and spatial conditions in the church, the work was eventually not permanently installed in the place for which it was intended¹³.

The paintings on the theme of the death of St. Lawrence which Titian painted for El Escorial and the Venetian church of Santa Maria Assunta dei Crociferi (today Dei Gesuiti) served as a model for many works depicting the last moments of the saint's life on earth. The fame of these paintings resonated throughout Europe. Those artists who did not have the opportunity to become familiar with the works *in situ* were able to get to know them by means of the print made by Cornelis Cort (fig. 3)¹⁴. Although it is not so obvious from the fresco, the painting made by the famous Venetian artist for El Escorial resonated in Tavarone's thought during his work on the decoration of the Genoese cathedral. Parallels can be seen in the preparatory study, which has so far remained unnoticed.

Tavarone can be classified among those painters for whom drawing was

¹³ Mulcahy 1980, p. 188; Di Fabio 2000, pp. 152-156.

¹⁴ Joachimides 2009, p. 352.

¹⁵ Newcome-Schleier 1989c, p. 30.

¹⁶ «[...] Lazzaro Tavarone suo discepolo, entrato un giorno nella sua stanza, in cui per terra ne stavano alcuni falci, tanti ne raccolse, quanti potè, e a casa portasseli. Così li salvò dalle fiamme», in Soprani, Ratti 1768, I, p. 82.

¹⁷ Soprani, Ratti 1768, I, p. 149; Soprani 1674 p. 154.

The preparatory work for the apse is documented by a modelletto¹⁸ and a drawing¹⁹. While the modelletto, in the view of some experts, is evidence of Sienese influences on Tavarone's work (Beccafumi, Vanni, Salimbeni)²⁰, the drawing is characterised by a technique revealing his training by Cambiaso²¹. In spite of this lack of agreement about the models influencing the decoration of the apse, there is no reason to suppose there was a large gap between the dates when the two works were made. Nevertheless, a comparison between them indicates that the drawing in the Musée du Louvre is the older work. While the modelletto corresponds exactly to the final realisation, minor differences can be seen in the drawing. It does not include the courtier leading the saint before the Emperor, and the position of the saint's right hand is slightly different. Also connected with the decoration of the Genoese cathedral are six drawings from the collection of the Gallerie Estensi in Modena. They are octagonal studies of saints for inclusion in the medallions surrounding the central scene on either side²². Rapid, energetic pen and brush drawings portray St. Lawrence²³, the Archangel Michael²⁴, St. Lorenz²⁵, St. Stephen²⁶, the Archangel Michael²⁷, and St. Bernard²⁸. These works are not the only ones to have been preserved which document Tavarone's progress to achieving an optimum result.



4, Lazzaro Tavarone, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1622, Pen and brown ink with brown wash, National Gallery, Prague, inv. K 38299

A drawing on a large sheet of paper in the Collection of Prints and Drawings of the National Gallery in Prague, which until now was classified as an unidentified work of art, is in fact closely linked with the decoration of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Genoa. It is a

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¹⁸ The *modelletto* was first published in Rutteri 1968, pp. 129-141.

¹⁹ Lazzaro Tavarone, *Saint Lawrence Showing the Poor and the Children to the Prefect Valerian* (Sic), Pen and brown ink, brown wash, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. 9271.

²⁰ Fusconi 1992, p. 95.

²¹ Mancini 2017, pp. 164-165.

²² Newcome-Schleier 1989d, p. 186; Newcome-Schleier 1990, p. 203; Collobi Ragghianti 1954, p. 441.

²³ *St. Lawrence*, pen and brush drawing, 220×332 mm, Gallerie Estensi, inv. no. 668.

²⁴ *The Archangel Michael*, pen and brush drawing, 220×332 mm, Gallerie Estensi, inv. no. 696.

²⁵ *St. Lorenz*, pen and brush drawing, 223×341 mm, Gallerie Estensi, inv. no. 646.

²⁶ *St. Stephen*, pen and brush drawing, 226×341 mm, Gallerie Estensi, inv. no. 647.

²⁷ *The Archangel Michael*, pen and brush drawing, 226×333 mm, Gallerie Estensi, inv. no. 648.

²⁸ *St. Bernard*, pen and brush drawing, 203×337 mm, Gallerie Estensi, inv. no. 694.



5, Lazzaro Tavarone, *Haman pleading Esther for his life*, 1612-1617, Black chalk, pen, dark brown ink greyish wash, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, inv. KKSgb5578

pen and brush drawing on the theme of *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* (fig. 4)²⁹. The history of this work of art is unknown. The Gallery acquired it in 1963 from a private collection without any further historical background. The only sign referring to previous owners is a “C” in the bottom right-hand corner³⁰.

Although this drawing corresponds to the painting in its basic spatial layout, there are several minor differences between the two works, indicating the changes in the painter’s ideas. The most obvious compositional change relates to the position of the saint’s body. The representation of St. Lawrence in the ceiling painting is a mirror image of that in the drawing. The position of the saint, as Tavarone depicted it in the Prague study, together with the figure of one of the court servants holding Lawrence down on the gridiron with a fork on the left-hand side, are much more reminiscent of Titian’s work commissioned by the Spanish King. The arrangement of the figures in the two works is so similar that it would appear that Tavarone adopted the main points of Titian’s composition in his drawing, simply viewing the scene from a different vantage point. In its rendering of the central detail, the drawing has more points in common with the famous work in El Escorial than with some drawings by Cambiaso and his circle³¹.

Several changes also took place in the staffage. For example, the drawing does not show the boy on the right-hand side, holding the saint’s diaconal robe and observing his suffering with

²⁹ Lazzaro Tavarone, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, black chalk, pen and brown ink, 437×332 mm, National Gallery in Prague, K 38299. Until now, the study has been included in inventories as the work of an anonymous 16th-century Netherlandish artist.

³⁰ Frits Lugt, *Les Marques de Collections de Dessins & d’Estampes*/Fondation Custodia, L.474.

³¹ *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence - The Collection* - Museo Nacional del Prado (museodelprado.es); Genova 1956, cat. no. 92.

distress. One of the men adding more coal under the gridiron in the drawing has been replaced in the ceiling painting by a man with a child, fanning the fire with a bellows. Several similar changes were also made. In spite of this, the final version maintains the appearance outlined by the painter in the drawing. The most significant difference is the change in the statue on the right-hand side. In the fresco Tavarone depicted Jove. By contrast, the statue in the drawing represents a man in armour. In the absence of any specific distinguishing signs, its interpretation is ambiguous. It is most likely to be the god Mars, as he appears quite frequently in works with this theme.

As Giulia Fusconi has remarked in connection with Genoese works of art, it is not always possible to definitely deduce the identity of the artist on the basis of similarities between a drawing and the final painting³². A good example is provided by the drawings by Luca Cambiaso, whose studies were frequently copied. However, this does not apply to the newly discovered drawing, in spite of the fact that it is not signed. A comparison with works that can definitely be attributed to Lazzaro Tavarone shows clearly that the drawing is by him. An identical style can be seen, for example, in the drawings of two biblical kings in the Palazzo Rosso³³, *The Visitation* in the Musée du Louvre³⁴, and *Haman Kneeling before Esther* in the Statens Museum for Kunst (fig. 5)³⁵. It would be possible to find a considerable number of appropriate comparisons. The identity of the artist responsible for the drawing in the Prague collection is also confirmed by numerous pentimenti. Residual figures are clearly to be seen in the drawing (for example, on the staircase), and in the part depicting the monarch the painter even glued a new piece of paper onto the sheet and drew a new composition on it.

The decoration of the Genoese cathedral which Tavarone was commissioned to carry out, and, together with it, the newly discovered drawing, are the last echoes of Italian Mannerism³⁶. Although the drawing of *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* was created in the 1620s, it shows no signs of the newly arrived style which transformed the artistic face of the whole of Europe. Nevertheless, the drawing is a fascinating testimony to artistic life in early-17th-century Liguria, and above all to the talent of Lazzaro Tavarone as a draughtsman.

³² Fusconi 1980, p. 57.

³³ *King David*, pen, brush, and ink drawing, inv. no. D 2937 and *Biblical King*, inv. no. D 2938. For more on these drawings: Genova 2009, cat. no. 15, p. 40.

³⁴ *The Visitation*, black chalk, pen and brush drawing, inv. no. 12189. For more details see Mancini 2017, pp. 168-169.

³⁵ Lazzaro Tavarone, *Haman Kneeling before Esther*, black chalk, pen and brush drawing, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, inv. no. GB 5578, in Newcome-Schleier 2004, pp. 60-61; Zanelli 2019.

³⁶ Rutteri 1968, p. 140.

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