

An 18th-century French drawing in the Baillieu Library

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Recently I had the opportunity to conduct in-depth research on an old master drawing in the Baillieu Library Print Collection at the University of Melbourne, which was donated by Dr J. Orde Poynton in 1959 (illustrated opposite). The focus of that 12-week research project was a striking drawing of Prometheus, the Titan from Greek mythology who acted against the will of the gods and bestowed the gift of fire upon humankind. As punishment for this transgression, Zeus bound Prometheus to a rock, where every day an eagle would eat his liver. The organ would regenerate at night, only to be eaten again the next day in a gruesome pattern of eternal torture.

The violent subject of this and other prints and drawings, mostly donated by Dr Poynton, is the basis for the current exhibition *Radicals, slayers and villains: Prints from the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne* which, after finishing its season at the Baillieu Library in August, will tour to the Art Gallery of Ballarat, Hamilton Art Gallery and Latrobe Regional Gallery. Here the Baillieu's drawing of Prometheus is making its exhibition debut as part of the university's collection. This has prompted my current research, which brought forth some surprising discoveries about the drawing's

origins, possible function and, in my view, true authorship.

Drawn in red chalk on paper, *Prometheus attacked by an eagle* is an unsigned and undated work that had previously been attributed to the Italian-born engraver Francesco Bartolozzi (1727–1815). This is indicated by the 'F. Bartolozzi' inscribed in graphite by another hand in the lower right-hand corner of the sheet, directly under the image. Although the author of this inscription is unknown, it was the initial clue upon which to start investigating.

The Baillieu Library Print Collection contains a number of sheets by Bartolozzi, the majority of which are reproductive prints after old master paintings and drawings, along with those of his contemporaries such as painter and draughtsman Giovanni Battista Cipriani (1727–1785). Included in the collection is a print based on Michelangelo's drawing of the same subject (albeit titled differently), *Prometheus and the vulture*, bound in one of two volumes of 73 engravings by Bartolozzi.¹ This print has been executed in stipple, an intaglio printmaking technique that Bartolozzi was to drive to fashionable heights during his most active period in London in the late 18th century.²

After exhausting the literature on Bartolozzi in my unsuccessful search for a work that may be related to the Prometheus drawing, a visual analysis of style was needed to confirm the attribution to Bartolozzi, or find an alternative theory.³

This task was complicated by the fact that Bartolozzi was a prolific and gifted copyist, and made his living imitating the styles of others through reproductive engravings and etchings. However, he was known to have occasionally 'indulged his fancy in original composition' by making drawings in black and red chalk.⁴ The British Museum holds some of his drawings, mainly academic nude studies, and a search of major museum collections that hold Bartolozzi's original graphic works revealed an artist with a very different touch from that evident in the present drawing. Instead of the powerful definition of musculature, bold form and overall baroque flavour found in the Baillieu Library's drawing, Bartolozzi's style is characterised by a greater delicacy of line-work, softer shading that describes form in a less defined manner, and an overall 'feminine grace'⁵ starkly at odds with *Prometheus attacked by an eagle*. Two drawings by Bartolozzi in the British Museum exemplify these traits. One is a genre scene of a shepherdess

Attributed to René-Michel Slodtz, *Prometheus attacked by an eagle* (c. 1750), drawing, red chalk on paper, sheet: 31.9 × 53.3 cm. Reg. no. 1959.5621, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



shearing sheep,⁶ and the other a rather stiff academic study of a nude man seated,⁷ whose figure is quite at odds with the exaggerated naturalism of our drawn figure of Prometheus.

Having discounted Bartolozzi

primarily on stylistic grounds, I returned to explore an alternative theory of authorship that would also explain certain pronounced aesthetic features of the Baillieu Library's drawing. This includes the way in

which the rocky outcrop, folds of drapery, figure of Prometheus and the eagle that preys upon him appear physically integrated and emergent from a single solid mass, which is surrounded by empty negative space.



René-Michel Slodtz, *Étude pour une statue de Persée*, drawing, red chalk on paper, 49.6 × 36.2 cm. Inv. 32855 recto, Musée du Louvre, ancienne collection Saint-Morys. Reproduced courtesy of the Musée du Louvre.

The pronounced musculature and folds of drapery are all emphatically modelled through light and shade, as if the artist were mentally travelling around each undulation in form. These factors contribute to a strong sculptural quality in the work, prompting the notion that the drawing may be depicting an existing sculpture, or possibly a design for a proposed sculpture.

After detecting a resonance with French sculptures of the 18th century, I undertook further research, which revealed Edmé Bouchardon (1698–1762) and his lesser-known contemporary René-Michel Slodtz (1705–1764) as sculptors of interest. Both executed drawings in red chalk with the prevalent use of single-line parallel hatching, along with a sculptural evocation of form similar to that of the Prometheus drawing.

The key revelation in this research project was the discovery of a group of drawings by René-Michel Slodtz held in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the Musée du Louvre. These are remarkably similar to the present work in both style and concept, and provide convincing evidence that the Prometheus drawing is of French origin and also executed by the hand of René-Michel Slodtz, rather than

a work by Francesco Bartolozzi as had been previously thought.⁸

Of the drawings by Slodtz held in the Louvre, a number portray mythological figures posed on roughly hewn rocky outcrops. Three works in particular are notably similar to the Prometheus drawing, with their dynamic sense of movement and the dramatic tension expressed through the body. These works also convey violent mythological narratives including Apollo flaying Marsyas, Perseus bearing a sword, and Andromeda in chains. Each is executed in red chalk and is of a comparable size to the Baillieu Library's drawing.

The Louvre's drawing of Perseus, *Étude pour une statue de Persée* (see above) is worthy of particular focus. In this and the Baillieu's drawing, the figure has an outstretched arm that bends at the wrist, allowing the hand to grip a rock face. In both drawings the figure's head turns to face his opponent over the opposite shoulder, bearing a grim expression and direct gaze. This pose creates an effective torsion in the body, which is also seen in the artist's drawing of Andromeda, *Andromède enchaînée*.⁹ Even the rock to which the figure in each drawing clings with an outstretched arm is almost identical, with the same angle and density of the parallel-line

hatching, and overall wedge-like shape. Like the Prometheus work, a minor suggestion of foliage, which amounts to some loose squiggles, is included in the drawing of Perseus, here in the vicinity of his knees. This betrays the same focused attention to evoking the monumental weight of flesh, rock and heavy drapery, rather than vegetation.

Both the Baillieu Library's Prometheus and the drawings in the Louvre appear to be studies for sculptural works that were either never executed, or were executed and are now lost. The former scenario is regarded as the most likely.¹⁰ The major catalogue by Francois Souchal, *Les Slodtz*, which chronicles the life and works of René-Michel and his artistic family, makes no reference to any statuary works relating to these drawings.¹¹ While Guilhem Scherf in his essay attributes the drawing of Apollo flaying Marsyas (opposite) to René-Michel, Scherf notes a telling observation made by a contemporary of Slodtz, art critic and artist Charles-Nicolas Cochin (1715–1790). Cochin referred to a certain 'indeterminacy' or 'uncertainty' in René-Michel's nature, a character trait that may explain the existence of these highly finished drawings that appear to have no associated sculpture or clear purpose, other

Attributed to René-Michel Slodtz, *Apollon écorchant Marsyas*, drawing, red chalk on paper, 38.5 × 46.3 cm. Inv. 32857 recto, Musée du Louvre, ancienne collection Saint-Morys. Reproduced courtesy of the Musée du Louvre.



than being accomplished artworks in themselves and conveying his fine skills as a draughtsman.¹² Scherf dates the Apollo drawing to about 1750; considering the similarities to the Prometheus drawing that this and others from this group contain, *Prometheus attacked by an eagle* may have been created around the same time.

Because there is a dearth of literature in English on René-Michel Slodtz, I will outline some of the key moments in his life that help us understand his work and the context in which it was created.

Life of René-Michel Slodtz

René-Michel Slodtz was born in France and was highly regarded in his lifetime, ranking amongst other better-known sculptors such as Bouchardon and Jean-Baptiste Pigalle (1714–1785).¹³ His father, Sébastien Slodtz (1655–1726), was born in Antwerp and emigrated to France to become a sculptor, a career also followed by René-Michel's older brothers Sébastien-Antoine (1695–1754) and Paul Ambroise (1702–1758). Yet René-Michel was considered the most prominent of the brothers.¹⁴ He was awarded the first prize for sculpture by the French Academy in 1726 and subsequently studied at the French Academy in Rome, a city in which

he was to live and work for 20 years. During this period he won several important commissions, including his marble sculpture of Saint Bruno in the Basilica of St Peter in the Vatican.¹⁵ René-Michel's long period spent in Rome is responsible for the influence of the Italian baroque evident in his larger statuary works, whereas his smaller decorative pieces reveal the French rococo leanings that were prevalent during the period.¹⁶ A great admirer of Bernini and Michelangelo, René-Michel had an affinity with Italian art that led to the nickname 'Michel-Ange' being bestowed upon him, which he adopted and used as his signature.

Upon returning to France, Slodtz had difficulty re-establishing himself, and although he won independent commissions for royal sculptures, no product is known to have survived. However, a small number of other major sculptural works are extant, such as the funeral monument to Languet de Gergy in the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris.¹⁷ Slodtz joined his brothers in the service of the king, designing and executing ephemeral decorations and artworks for the *Menus-Plaisirs du Roi* (the department of the royal household responsible for organising ceremonies, funerals and fetes of all kinds). The commemorative engravings produced

by the *Cabinet du Roi* were often the only surviving records of such elaborate artistic displays.¹⁸

Evidence in the paper

All of the mythologically inspired drawings by Slodtz that are held in the Louvre share a common characteristic in the pedestal supporting the rocky outcrop upon which the figures are posed. A pedestal is notably absent from the Baillieu Library's drawing of Prometheus, but examination of the paper might explain why this feature does not exist. On the bottom edge of the sheet is some darkening of the paper, a greater number of small black spots and accretions than elsewhere on the sheet, and the drawn marks appear slightly smudged and have deepened in colour. These changes are consistent with water damage of some kind. It is possible that the sheet was trimmed to remove damaged areas that may have included some of the image, and potentially a pedestal. Indeed, from examining the drawn marks that flow to the bottom edge it appears that the image has been truncated and the drawing would have originally continued beyond the existing edge of the sheet.

Studying the drawing through transmitted light reveals the telltale lines of chain-laid paper. This is

consistent with the hypothesis that the date of creation is c. 1750, just before the advent of wove papers (which were first printed upon in 1757 in England).¹⁹ Transmitted light also reveals a prominent fleur-de-lys watermark in the paper. This popular emblem was used as a watermark by numerous papermakers in France, Holland and Italy. While consultation with key texts on watermarks revealed no direct matches, further investigation into the watermark could prove valuable in confirming the date of the drawing.²⁰

There are many remaining questions on the drawing's provenance and the earlier attribution to Francesco Bartolozzi. It is difficult to be sure of what prompted this and at what stage in the history of the object it occurred. Closer inspection of the inscription reveals the remnants of erased letters, also in graphite, just beneath 'F. Bartolozzi'. This may suggest that whoever wrote it was unsure of the attribution. The Louvre's group of drawings by René-Michel Slodtz, discussed earlier, originates from the aristocratic Saint-Morys collection, which was confiscated during the French Revolution. How *Prometheus attacked by an eagle* ended up in the collection of Dr J. Orde Poynton, an English medical practitioner who emigrated

to Australia after World War II, is currently a mystery, yet the drawing's presence in Melbourne reflects the exciting scope for further research into other unattributed drawings in the collection, and the surprises such research may yield.

Marguerite Brown recently graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Master of Art Curatorship. She is working as a print curator and freelance arts writer, and has been awarded the Harold Wright Scholarship to study in the Prints and Drawings Department at the British Museum in 2014.

- 1 Francesco Bartolozzi (after Michelangelo), *Prometheus and the vulture*, stipple, published in *Seventy-three prints, engraved by F. Bartolozzi from original pictures and drawings in the collection of His Majesty*, London: John and Josiah Boydell, n.d., vol. 2, plate 21. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 2 Arthur M. Hind (ed.), *Bartolozzi and other stipple engravers working in England at the end of the eighteenth century*, London: William Heineman, 1912, p. 5.
- 3 For a catalogue of 2,202 Bartolozzi prints, see Alexandre de Vesme and Augusto Calabi, *Francesco Bartolozzi: Catalogue des estampes et notice biographique*, Milan: Guido Modiano, 1928.
- 4 J.T. Herbert Baily, *Francesco Bartolozzi, R.A.*, London: Otto, 1907, p. ix.
- 5 Baily, *Francesco Bartolozzi*, p. x.
- 6 Francesco Bartolozzi, *Sheep shearing*, c. 1727–1815, drawing, black and red chalk on paper, 30.4 × 24.7 cm. Reg. no. 1885.0509.1623, British Museum.
- 7 Francesco Bartolozzi, *Study for a picture*, c. 1727–1815, drawing, red and black chalk on paper, 22.9 × 24.7 cm. Reg. no. 1886.0410.19, British Museum.

- 8 With sincere thanks to Dr Edouard Kopp (J. Paul Getty Museum) and Dr Malcolm Baker (University of California Riverside) for sharing their valuable expertise and for assisting with this research.
- 9 Attributed to René-Michel Slodtz, *Andromède enchainée*, drawing, red chalk on paper, 49.5 × 36.1 cm. Inv. 32858 recto, Musée du Louvre, ancienne collection Saint-Morys.
- 10 Guilhem Scherf, 'Un sculpteur qui dessine: Michel-Ange Slodtz', in Nicolas de Sainte Fare Garnot (ed.), *Dessins français aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Actes du colloque, École du Louvre, 24 et 25 juin 1999*, Paris: Louvre, 2003, pp. 351–66.
- 11 François Souchal, *Les Slodtz, sculpteurs et décorateurs du Roi (1685–1764)*, Paris: Editions E. De Boccard, 1966.
- 12 Scherf, 'Un sculpteur qui dessine'.
- 13 Terrence Hodgkinson, Review of *Les Slodtz, sculpteurs et décorateurs du Roi (1685–1764)* by François Souchal, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 111, no. 972, March 1969, pp. 159–60.
- 14 Hodgkinson, Review of *Les Slodtz*, p. 159.
- 15 René-Michel Slodtz, *Saint Bruno*, marble, height: 450 cm. Vatican, Basilica of St Peter.
- 16 Walter Heil, 'Two pieces of French sculpture of the eighteenth century', *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit*, vol. 10, no. 2, November 1928, p. 22.
- 17 Scherf, 'Un sculpteur qui dessine', p. 363.
- 18 For extensive catalogue listings and examples of such commemorative engravings, refer to Souchal, *Les Slodtz*.
- 19 Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: The history and technique of an ancient craft*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, p. 345.
- 20 Edward Heawood, *Watermarks: Mainly of the 17th and 18th centuries*, Amsterdam: The Paper Publications Society, 1950; W.A. Churchill, *Watermarks in paper in Holland, England, France etc., in the XVII and XVIII centuries and their interconnection*, Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2006.