

# Angel with the sponge

## A drawing in the Baillieu Library

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Dr John Orde Poynton's generous gift of some 3,700 Old Master prints, which in 1959 established the Baillieu Library Print Collection, included a handful of drawings. These had received little attention until recently, when they have become a focus of interest for researchers. For an eight-week research project that I carried out last year, I chose an unattributed red and black chalk drawing of an adolescent male angel standing on a floating cloud (pictured right). The winged figure is clothed in a mass of swirling drapery, and in his hands he delicately holds a long reed with a sponge at one end. Notwithstanding the absence of a signature on the front, a handwritten inscription in pen and ink on the reverse reveals a name: *Antonj Georgetti*. It did not take long to establish that this identified the sculptor of the statue after which the drawing was made—one of the ten marble angels, each holding one of the *Arma Christi* ('Weapons of Christ'), that adorn the Ponte Sant' Angelo in Rome (see p. 5). Even without the inscription, the Baillieu drawing is close enough to the sculpture of the *Angel with the sponge* (1667–69) by Antonio Giorgetti (c. 1635–1669) for us to be certain that this is its subject.



Previous page: Unknown artist, *Angel with the sponge*, c. 1669–1725, charcoal and red chalk on paper, 34.0 × 21.8 cm. 1959.5610, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

## The angels on Ponte Sant'Angelo, and Antonio Giorgetti

The decoration of this famous and historical bridge (previously the Pons Aelius) took place between 1667 and 1672, and was commissioned by Pope Clement IX (reigned 1667–69) and his successor, Clement X (reigned 1670–76). Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), Rome's most distinguished sculptor and architect, planned and supervised the entire program, although he contributed only one statue himself; the others were assigned to lesser-known sculptors.<sup>1</sup> The choice of angels stemmed from Pope Gregory the Great's famous vision in AD 590 of the Archangel Michael above Hadrian's mausoleum (now the Castel Sant'Angelo). In 1348 a similar miracle occurred during a procession led by Pope Clement VI from the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli to St Peter's Basilica. The pope, along with 60 others, saw the marble angel on top of the mausoleum—placed to commemorate the earlier vision—bow to the holy image of Mary being carried in the parade.<sup>2</sup>

We know for sure who created each statue, and when, thanks to the wealth of primary sources that document the commission. These

include *giustificazioni* (account books) recording payments to artists and craftsmen; *avvisi* (handwritten newsletters) concerning the decoration, found in the diary of Carlo Cartari (1614–1697), archivist of the Castel Sant'Angelo at the time; and accounts from contemporary guidebooks, such as that by Filippo Titi (1674), which identifies the sculptor of each statue.<sup>3</sup> On 19 September 1669 Cartari reported that Giorgetti's *Angel with the sponge* was placed on the pier on the Castel end of the bridge, adding that it was 'the best of the four [statues] placed [on the bridge] so far'.<sup>4</sup>

Less is known about Giorgetti than about any of the other sculptors involved in the project, although it is thought that he was trained by Alessandro Algardi (1598–1654)—Bernini's main rival—and was well enough established in 1658 to take on a 10-year-old boy named Lorenzo Ottone as an apprentice.<sup>5</sup> By 1660 he was on the roll of Francesco Barberini's *famiglia*, which meant he would have had an almost constant influx of work restoring antiques and carving alabaster busts, aside from more significant assignments.<sup>6</sup> He was married on 15 September 1668, a month after receiving the first payment for the *Angel with the sponge*, but he died on Christmas night of the

following year. Considering how soon this was after the angel's installation on the bridge, it is most likely that the sculpture was completed by his brother, Giuseppe, also a sculptor, who collaborated with Antonio on several other projects.<sup>7</sup>

## The Baillieu Library's drawing

Is the drawing in the Baillieu Library in any way linked to Giorgetti? Although it depicts his statue, a number of facts suggest that this is as far as the drawing's connection with the sculptor goes. All of the sculptors involved in the decoration of the Ponte Sant'Angelo, including Antonio, were likely to have worked from a sketched design (*pensiaro*) provided by Bernini, and possibly even a clay model (*bozzetto*).<sup>8</sup> However, whereas the Baillieu drawing might be described as 'finished', Bernini's sketches are just that: sketches. These rapidly drawn *pensieri* were used in the planning stages of designing the angels, and by drawing them himself Bernini was able to ensure uniformity in their proportions and poses, as well as a controlled diversity of expressions and drapery patterns. Only one of the original *pensieri* survives today: a sketch for the *Angel with the crown of thorns* in the Museum

der bildenden Künste Leipzig. Notwithstanding, *pensiari* were likely made for all the sculptures, as there are at least six known copies of the sketches in brown ink and wash. Fortuitously, one of these is of the *Angel with the sponge*, which although now lost is reproduced in Mark Weil's comprehensive study of the decoration of the Ponte Sant' Angelo, and is thought to be in Bernini's own hand.<sup>9</sup> Comparing this with the Baillieu drawing, the differences are striking: whereas our angel is static and, in places, a rather awkward evocation of a stone statue, the wash drawing is dynamic and fluid, as if drawn from life, and typical of Bernini's lively drawing style.<sup>10</sup> It is certain then that the Baillieu drawing came after the sculpture was completed, playing no part in its production.

Jennifer Montagu, who has carried out the most thorough research on the Giorgetti brothers, knows of no drawings by Antonio, so the Baillieu's drawing is unlikely to have been made by him after the statue was completed; presumably he would have been ailing considerably by then anyway.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it is plausible that whoever created the drawing did so quite soon after the statue was positioned on the bridge in September 1669, as the angels



enjoyed immediate popularity with the public. An *avviso* now in the Archivio di Stato in Modena, dated October 1671, went so far as to proclaim that 'the Ponte S. Angelo is being visited by everyone in order to admire Bernini's valour and also to see which of the sculptors has best satisfied the taste of the world'.<sup>12</sup> Montagu also points out that the angels were popular objects for art students to copy, and that the addition of red in the Baillieu Library's angel might suggest that the artist was testing out colours, to see how well the figure might be conveyed in oils.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the use of

red chalk and charcoal in this manner is uncommon in drawings like this and is a point of interest.

By comparing our drawing with a recent photograph of the sculpture (pictured left), we find further subtle differences that give us insight into the draftsman's intentions. While he or she has copied the drapery of the statue very closely—the deep folds and creases reproduced with care and precision—the body of the angel is rendered with much less confidence, and departs somewhat from Giorgetti's truthful modelling. In particular, the head and fingers look as if they might have been added later from memory, rather than from 'life'. This two-sitting theory might also explain the choice of red and black. Although some effort has been made to blend the two—with flecks of colour reflected on the angel's grey legs as if to make him fleshier and more three-dimensional—in this drawing the imposing red garment is the star of the show.

### Iconography of the *Arma Christi* and the sponge-bearer

By the 17th century, representations of angels carrying the instruments of Christ's Passion were prevalent throughout Europe, serving as a potent reminder of the gift of

Orazio Farinati after Paolo Farinati,  
*Angels with the instruments of the Passion*,  
c. 1560–1620, etching, 17.5 × 29.0 cm  
(sheet trimmed to image). 1959.2466,  
gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959,  
Baillieu Library Print Collection,  
University of Melbourne.



salvation through Christ's sacrifice on Calvary.<sup>14</sup> An etching in the Baillieu Library Print Collection, by Orazio Farinati (1558/61 – before 1627) after Paolo Farinati (1524–1606), *Angels with the instruments of the Passion*, is a particularly charming example (see above), showing six cherubs, carrying the lance, Cross, scourge, crown of thorns and sponge.

In the early Middle Ages, images of the *Arma Christi* signified Christ's victory over death and Satan; they were interpreted literally as weapons of triumph and authority. Over time the instruments became associated more with the story of the Passion, corresponding to the veneration of relics that took hold in the late medieval

period. This change is also reflected in the popularity of the devotional text *Meditationes vitae Christi*, a manuscript giving a detailed account of the life of Christ and the Passion, thought to have been written by a Franciscan in the 14th century and later widely disseminated throughout Europe with the invention of printing.<sup>15</sup>

A more specific history can be traced for the iconography of the angel sponge-bearer. In sixth-century art, angels watching over the Cross were depicted carrying a sceptre, but by the 12th century this was often replaced by the new symbols of sovereignty: the lance and the sponge. According to the Bible, the holy sponge was dipped in gall and vinegar (or sour wine, depending on the source) and offered to Jesus to drink as a final act of persecution: ‘Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down.” With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last’ (Mark 15:36–7). Vinegar was made bitter by the infusion of wormwood or other substances and given to those who were crucified to render them insensible to pain. Legend gave the sponge-bearer the name of Stephaton, and medieval art regularly paired him with Longinus, the soldier who bore the lance. The two, standing symmetrically on either side of the Cross and holding up their slender ‘weapons’, symbolised the Church (Longinus) and the Synagogue (Stephaton).

As well as the aforementioned visions of angels connected to the site of the Ponte Sant’ Angelo, relics

of Christ’s Passion, including pieces of the sponge, are held and venerated throughout the churches of Rome, making angels carrying the *Arma Christi* a fitting choice for the bridge’s decoration. Pilgrims and other pedestrians walking across the bridge on their way to the Vatican would have been moved by the expressive statues, as they contemplated the multiple sufferings that Christ endured in his final moments.

### Watermark, inscription, paper

Analysis of the physical aspects of the Baillieu Library’s *Angel with the sponge* revealed some noteworthy information. By viewing the paper over a lightbox, we could see a small watermark at the bottom of the angel’s right wing. When flipped 180 degrees it shows a mark of three hills (commonly referred to as ‘mounts’ in watermark catalogues), surmounted by a cross (pictured right).<sup>16</sup> Variations of this watermark are found as early as the later 14th century, however the closest example in the Gravell Watermark Archive is found on the papers of William Blathwayt (1649?–1717), which were in use in around 1683–84.<sup>17</sup> This watermark is very similar in shape and size (3.6 × 1.6 cm) to that found in the Baillieu drawing, suggesting that our drawing

may have been made at a similar time, and before 1700.

Another point worthy of note is the spelling of Antonio Giorgetti’s name on the reverse: *Antonj Georgetti*. The letter *j* occurs in French as a variant of *i* in some proper nouns, and the replacement of *i* with *e* in the surname also suggests a French hand. We might speculate that the drawing was made by a student from the French Academy in Rome, which was



founded in 1666 as a branch of Paris's Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. The curriculum emphasised direct contact with antique art, as well as life drawing, the study of anatomy, and copying contemporary Baroque paintings and sculptures in Rome.<sup>18</sup>

In each corner of the sheet is a small pinhole, informing us that the drawing was once pinned to a wall and enjoyed by a previous owner, perhaps a prestigious collector in Europe. Since 1959 the drawing has been in the care of the curators of the Baillieu Library Print Collection, and was recently displayed in the exhibition *My learned object* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, alongside works on paper and numerous other items from the University of Melbourne's 30 cultural collections. That we may never know who created this drawing is perhaps, then, beside the point, for it offers insight into a fascinating period of architectural planning and image-making in late 17th-century Rome, and continues to be enjoyed by viewers in the 21st century.

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- 1 Bernini sculpted the *Angel with the superscription*. Apart from Antonio Giorgetti, the other sculptors of the *Arma Christi* were Antonio Raggi (*Angel with the column*), Lazzaro Morelli (*Angel with the scourge*), Paolo Naldini (*Angel with the crown of thorns* and *Angel with robe and dice*), Cosimo Fancelli (*Angel with the sudarium*), Girolamo Lucenti (*Angel with the nails*), Ercole Ferrata (*Angel with the Cross*), and Domenico Guidi (*Angel with the lance*). See Mark S. Weil, 'The angels of the Ponte Sant' Angelo: A comparison of Bernini's sculpture to the work of two collaborators', *Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1971, p. 253.
- 2 For an extensive bibliography dealing with the decoration of the Ponte Sant' Angelo, see Rudolf Wittkower, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, 2nd edn, London: Phaidon, 1966, pp. 248–51.
- 3 For full documentation and bibliography of *avvisi* and *giustificazioni*, see Filippo Titi, *Studio di pittura, scoltura, et architettura nelle chiese di Roma*, Rome: Mancini, 1674; Mark S. Weil, *The history and decoration of the Ponte S. Angelo*, University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974, pp. 31–5 and 117–38. A breakdown of documents relating to Bernini's involvement is given in Rudolf Wittkower, *Bernini: The sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, Milan: Electa, 1990, pp. 288–91.
- 4 'che sia il migliore delli quattro collative sin'bora', translated by Jennifer Montagu in her article 'Antonio and Giuseppe Giorgetti: Sculptors to Cardinal Francesco Barberini', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1970, p. 286.
- 5 Montagu, 'Antonio and Giuseppe Giorgetti', p. 279.
- 6 Montagu, 'Antonio and Giuseppe Giorgetti', p. 280.
- 7 Montagu notes that not only did Antonio make payments over to his brother, but that the handwriting on the receipts shows clearly that he was ailing well before his death in December 1669. Montagu, 'Antonio and Giuseppe Giorgetti', p. 286.
- 8 Weil, *History and decoration*, p. 41.
- 9 'The wash drawing was formerly in the Rospigliosi Collection (Giulio Rospigliosi became Pope Clement IX), but its present location is unknown' (Weil, *History and decoration*, p. 41, reproduced p. 42). This and another, the *Angel carrying the Cross*, were published as Bernini originals in Stanislao Fraschetti, *Il Bernini: la sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*, Milan: U. Hoepli, 1900, pp. 372–3. This attribution was eventually accepted by Wittkower. (See Wittkower, *Bernini*, 1990, p. 290, for his final discussion of the drawings.)
- 10 For the most comprehensive work on Bernini's drawings, see Heinrich Brauer and Rudolf Wittkower, *Bernini's drawings* (1931), New York: Collectors Editions, 1969.
- 11 Dr Jennifer Montagu (honorary fellow, Warburg Institute), email correspondence, 15 August 2015.
- 12 Cited in Weil, *History and decoration*, p. 134.
- 13 Montagu, email correspondence.
- 14 For an overview of representations of the *Arma Christi* in Western art, see 'The "Arma Christi" and Man of Sorrows', in Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art, volume 2: The Passion of Jesus Christ*, trans. Janet Seligman, London: Lund Humphries, 1972, pp. 184–97.
- 15 Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art*, pp. 186–9.
- 16 Edward Heawood, *Watermarks: Mainly of the 17th and 18th centuries*, Amsterdam: Paper Publications Society, 1950; W.A. Churchill, *Watermarks in paper in Holland, England, France etc., in the XVII and XVIII centuries and their interconnection*, Mansfield Centre, Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2006.
- 17 See Folger Shakespeare Library X.d 481 (8), Washington DC, in the *Thomas L. Gravell Watermark Archive*, [www.gravell.org](http://www.gravell.org), viewed 20 February 2016.
- 18 Kathryn Calley Galitz, 'The French Academy in Rome', *Heilbrunn timeline of art history*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–16, [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/frac/hd\\_frac.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/frac/hd_frac.htm), viewed 20 February 2016.