

Museum director cracks the Domenico code

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Domenico Tiepolo, "Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: the second prayer." Private collection on loan to the Indiana University Art Museum. Copyright Holder: Indiana, private collection on loan to the Indiana University Art Museum

A museum director's detective work is restoring a visionary 18th century Venetian artist to his rightful place in the history of art.

Indiana University Art Museum Director Adelheid M. (Heidi) Gealt and George Knox, an emeritus professor at the University of Vancouver, have reconstructed the largest-known New Testament cycle produced by a single artist: 313 large, finished drawings in ink and wash by Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804), one of the foremost Venetian artists active during

the second half of the 18th century.

Dismembered, sold and scattered soon after his death in 1804, Domenico's narrative, which retells the history of early Christianity, has never before been published or exhibited. Nearly 60 of the finest drawings in the series will be on display later this month at the Frick Collection in New York City. *Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804): A New Testament*, to be held at the Frick from Oct. 24 through Jan. 7, 2007, showcases the wide variety of compositional devices, gestures and settings Domenico used for his New Testament cycle and demonstrates the artist's gift as a storyteller and chronicler of his time. A smaller version of the show will be at the IU Art Museum from March 28 through May 20, 2007.

Domenico's main contribution to art history, Gealt said, is "his gift of the drawn serial narrative. Here's an artist from the end of the 18th century making these elaborate serial narratives. They have a film quality to them. He was already anticipating the camera and film, and he was starting to think about how to move a story frame by frame. He made a real conscious attempt to knit the drawings together. It's startling."

The exhibition coincides with the landmark publication by Gealt and Knox of the catalogue raisonné of Domenico's New Testament cycle -- a feat of historical and biblical scholarship that brings together for the first time all 313 known drawings. The book, *Domenico Tiepolo: A New Testament*, published by Indiana University Press, includes full-color reproductions of the drawings, arranged to follow the New Testament narrative from the lives of Joachim and Anna (Christ's grandparents) through the acts of Peter and Paul. Together, the exhibition and publication are meant to restore Domenico's lost masterpiece in its original context, Gealt said.

The son and pupil of the celebrated genius Giambattista Tiepolo

(1696-1770), Domenico made his greatest contribution as a draftsman and is probably best known for his drawn narrative cycles of the commedia dell'arte character Punchinello. His greatest ambition, though, was reserved for the New Testament, which inspired a series more than three times longer than any of his others.

The series reflects his thoughtful reading of the New Testament and his research into and revival of long-neglected medieval devotional texts, including Meditations on the Life of Christ and The Golden Legend. Domenico's cycle is distinctive for "rehearsing" the visual and literary traditions the New Testament inspired, as it places those traditions within a new, personal and expanded interpretation, Gealt said.

"Domenico expected us to exercise our memory, knowledge and awareness of the text and of art history," she added.

While many of the drawings showcase Domenico's gifts as a grand storyteller, other sheets reveal his profound piety and depth of emotional connection with the suffering Christ. In one of the exhibition's most moving drawings, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: The Second Prayer, taken from the story of Christ's Passion, Domenico omits the usual accessory figures, choosing instead to concentrate on the anguish of a kneeling Jesus, arms upraised in fervent prayer as he confronts his imminent death.

Gealt, an internationally recognized expert on Domenico, and Knox, one of the world's leading authorities on Venetian art, including the work of Giambattista Tiepolo as well as Domenico, were presented with enormous challenges as they tried to piece together this massive puzzle. They spent several years culling through archives and sales records and visiting dealers to relocate the drawings and reassemble them. To identify the drawings' subjects, they delved deeply into sacred and historical literature and studied a vast pictorial history to place each

drawing into an appropriate narrative order.

Their research yielded many important discoveries, including Domenico's careful study of texts, his preferences for embedding visual clues as references to textual differences within his images and his pictorial solutions for resolving differences among sources regarding sequence. They also uncovered the artist's apparent awareness of emerging 19th-century debates regarding the primacy of the Gospel of Mark over that of Matthew and his unique development of St. Peter as a key eyewitness to sacred events.

Cherished by collectors as individual images representing the talents of a noted draftsman, the drawings remained unappreciated as part of a larger narrative, since they were not understood in their full context. When restored to their place within his epic series, Domenico's New Testament drawings reveal an extraordinary accomplishment. So strikingly different from earlier traditions that Gealt and Knox call it *A New Testament*, Domenico's cycle is a landmark in the history of art and is expected to make important contributions to 18th-century and New Testament studies, as well as to the history of sacred imagery, serial narrative, drawing and Venetian art and culture.

The Domenico exhibition will run at the Frick Collection, located at 1 E. 70th St. in New York City, from Oct. 24 to Jan. 7, 2007. Gealt will give a free public lecture on "The Tiepolo Code" on Oct. 25 at 6 p.m. in which she will examine the ways the artist linked his drawings while referencing, in unique ways, his textual sources.

Source: Indiana University

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