Fig. 1 (right): J. Gregory according to M. Willmann, The Holy Family with Young St. John the Baptist, 1795, Prague, National Gallery, Photo by the gallery.

Andrzej Koziół

The Function of Michael Willmann’s Drawings*

The fundamental issue of interdependence of the form of drawings and their function has attracted surprisingly little attention in hitherto conducted research on Michael Willmann’s drawings. Though as far back as in 1919 Joseph Meder in his incomparable work warned against treating drawing as einheitliche Kunstgattung [...], als etwas Absolutes, recommending: Vor jeder Zeichnung [...], nach Zweck, Absicht oder Bestimmung fragen, a long lasting line of the description of Willmann’s drawings has been established by the picture of Willmann as a romantic genius-creator, vehement visionary, expressing in art his religious exultation – the picture suggestively sketched by Ernst Kloss in his fundamental monograph of the artist. Thus notwithstanding the obvious “subsidiary” character of the existing Willmann’s works, they were treated almost as an autonomous formula of the artist’s creation. The formal variety of the works was to no effect described both in the categories of the evolution of style and as an expression of the artist, about whom Hubertus Lassow as late as in 1994 wrote that es verging wohl kaum ein Tag in seinem Leben, an dem er nicht gezeichnet hat. The present paper – a belated effort to gain an answer for the postulated by Meder elementary question – shows the drawing activity of the artist in a new light. In all probability, Willmann was not such a passionate draughtsman as it was thought until recently. His less numerous produced drawings in fact seem to originate rather from a deeply-rooted guild tradition and workshop praxis, than conceived in the category of the “drawing” creation of a modern artist.

A group of mostly lost Rembrandt-esque drawings by Willmann, known from the facsimile series by Joseph Gregory from the end of 18th century, occupied a special place in the artist’s œuvre. An extremely sketchy aspect of those works as well as the lack of connection with the paintings ranked them, according to the Jaromír Neumann’s expression, as the drawing monologue of the artist – the apogee of the drawing output of Willmann. That romantic monologue in reality turned out to be a pragmatic dialogue of young Willmann, studying in Amsterdam the rudiments of composition, with the accessible art of mainly Italian Renaissance, available for him in the form of engravings. According to the biography of the artist published in the Latin edition of Joachim von Sandrart’s Teutsche Academie Willmann, who could not afford apprenticeship at a very famous master’s, bought a set of “prototypes”, basing on which, adopting the methods of Jacob Backer and also of Rembrandt and others, started very severe exercises.

* This article presents part of the results of the research project Michael Willmann Drawings (No. 1H01E 00310) supported by Committee of Scientific Research (Komitet Naukowy).
That autodidactics of his was begun by a rudimentary practice, namely the study of single figure or a group of several figures, such as for example *The Holy Family with St. John the Baptist* [fig. 1], based on the engraving by M. Rota after Tycian (II. Bartsch 2). Next step Willmann learned was to ameliorate thus copied scenes by adding onto them new human figures. For example, the scene *The Birth of Mary* [fig. 2], copied in its entirety from the anonymous engraving after G. Romanso (II. Bartsch 6), was developed by the addition of three figures placed in the background. The most creative exercise by Willmann were the efforts to make a totally new composition by an appropriate arrangement of separate fragments of one or two engravings. A dynamic but uniform and balanced composition of the exemplary drawing *The Massacre of the Innocents* [fig. 3] was created by compiling single figures and groups redrawn from the two engravings: by M. Dentu after B. Bandinelli (II. Bartsch 21) and by Ph. Galle after F. Floris (II. Bartsch 29). Thus the emphasized by the researchers sketchy form of those works in fact appears to result from the specific compositional interpretation of the graphic “prototype”. In other words, it ensues directly from the attempt to capture in a model those elements and their connecting relations which constitute – in Willmann’s own term – *Ordinaria of the visual representation*. It is not known for how long after having left Amsterdam Willmann continued making such compositional sketches. Undoubtedly, they were purposefully kept by the artist and together with his collection of the graphic “prototypes”, accompanied him in his later artistic career.

In 1660 Willmann settled down in Leubus in Silesia upon the invitation of the abbot of the local Cistercian monastery, Arnold Freiberger. This fact precipitated the period of intense creative activity of the artist, marked by unremitting work for numerous catholic and protestant customers, as well as for secular founders. The necessity of prompt coping with the flood of orders made Willmann efficiently reorganize his workshop. Most probably, already since the work on the first part of the Leubuser martyrdom series (1661–62) the painter hired for larger orders additional collaborators while the very process of production of a standard religious picture became extremely simplified. Most of large-format canvases meant for church interiors were left in the form of rough sketches, where very often beneath a layer of paint a bole ground could be seen. The inventive phase of the work was no less simplified by the extensive use of the artist’s collection of graphic models and Willmann’s artistic skill, gained through the aforementioned Amsterdam practice. In this way, the composition of a picture consisted of assembling suitable “prototypes”, which Willmann copied in their entirety, as was the case with the lost *Angels’ Pieta* from 1661, based on the anonymous engraving after Otto van Veen (Holl. 3), or compiled from their fragments a new work of art. The latter procedure is evidenced for example by *The Martyrdom of St. Andrew* from 1662, based on the engraving by A. Voet II according to Rubens, enlarged by

Fig. 6 (above left): M. Willmann, Abraham’s Sacrifice, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo by Jörg P. Anders.

Fig. 7 (above): M. Willmann, The Model of a Sitting Woman with Studies of Feet, Warsaw, National Museum. Photo by the museum.

Fig. 8 (below left): J. Eschelweyer, The Models of Heads. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo by Jörg P. Anders.
adding among else the figure of the kneeling man, adopted from L. Vosterman's engraving, also according to Rubens (Holl. 88). Noteworthy is the fact that only two Willmann's drawings are known, which are directly connected with the phase of the artist's work on composition and its transfer onto the support of the prepared picture: the precisely rendered Six Days of Creation [fig. 4] and the more sketchy work The Ancestors of St. Joseph [fig. 5]¹. Moreover, both works were created during the realization of particular orders - a canvas with a large number of small details² and fresco decoration in St. Joseph church in Grüssau³, which required the prior preparation of a cartoon. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility that some general compositional sketches of the paintings were prepared by the artist and after having been made use of, discarded or reused as a surface for a new drawing. In my opinion, however, it is more likely that Willmann, widely availing himself of graphic "prototypes", made compositional sketches for his pictures only sporadically, in special cases, while his staple procedure was to make a contour brush sketch directly on the grounded surface of the painting, in the underpainting layer. Apart from the sketchy, nearly alla prima formula of working out the paintings another argument supporting this hypothesis is the way Willmann's "master", Rembrandt, worked. According to the latest findings of the Netherlandish team of researchers, Rembrandt supplant the preparatory drawing on paper by a monochromatic brush sketch in oil made directly on the surface of the grounded support⁴. Willmann seems to have made more often drawings which were not connected with any particular painting but were supposed to complete his bank of graphic models - the
works, to which the painter’s own phrase – *Inventionis* could be applied. This may have been the function of the unpublished so far representation of *Abraham’s Sacrifice* (fig. 6). The scene was accompanied by an extensive artist’s commentary which, as I suppose, could have pointed out subjects of the scenes for the future use of the drawing as a “prototype” of composition. Apart from the enumeration of the six burnt-offerings from the Old Testament, together with a meticulous identification of their biblical source, on the back of the drawing some additional notes concerning the age of the biblical persons as well as the quantity, species and the age of the sacrificed animals were annotated. One of the inscriptions: *Jacob ist 25 Jahr alt [ . . . ] da er sollen geschlechter werden* could have been for Willmann the clue conducting him to make use of *Abraham’s Sacrifice* as one of the models for *The Ancestors of Joseph* (fig. 5), specifically a silhouette of kneeling Isaac.

This set of graphic and drawing compositional models, which was the basis of the functioning of the painter’s workshop, was surely supplemented by some models of the representation of a single human figure, such as for example *The Model of a Sizing Woman with Studies of Feet* (fig. 7), and also by drawing sets of “prototypes” of heads and other elements of human body. Although we are not in the possession of authentic Willmann’s drawings of this type, there are sixteen drawings made by his associate, Johann Eibelwiler from Breslau, till now ascribed to Willmann (fig. 8). Those drawings allow us to infer that Willmann, following in the steps of Rembrandt², used to manufacture this type of works serving as workshop models for his apprentices and associates.

The hitherto conducted research on Willmann artistic activity has revealed but scarce reflections on the model of functioning of the multi-personal artist’s workshop. The lack of any holistic examinations of the painting œuvre by Willmann and his circle turns us to the words of the artist himself, recorded in the one of the letters to the abbot of Sedlec, Heinrich Snopel. Willmann, recommending his stepson and pupil Johann

---

**Fig. 9 (above left):** M. Willmann, *An Apostle*, before 1692, Warsaw, National Museum, Photo by the museum.

**Fig. 10 (above right):** M. Willmann, *The Assumption of Mary*, 1702, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Photo by Jörg P. Anders.

**Fig. 11 (opposite above):** M. Willmann, *Christ Healing the Sick*, 1676–78, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Photo by the Graphische Sammlung Albertina.
Christoph Liska, as a fully self-dependent painter, stressed that ... mein Stieffohn brauch auch weder meiner Modelle noch Inventions ... " This meant that Liska, already as a student and associate of his step-father not only have used the set of master's compositional ideas but also, that working on a picture, he needed a previously prepared Modell — as can be assumed from the correspondence — an oil sketch. This in turn implies that the preparation of final models of the realised by Willmann paintings took place in a technique much easier, faster and having more potential than drawing — an oil sketch made on canvas or paper. A considerable amount of preserved sketches — we are cognizant of seventeen retrospective pieces [fig. 9] — indicates clearly that this type of procedure was a constant element in the functioning of the painter's workshop. Neumann supposed that the oil model of the painting The Martyrdom of St. Philip and Jacob for Sedlec was sent by Willmann for acceptance to the abbott Snopek. It seems however, that presenting oil sketches of the ordered works to the founders, if ever happened, was sporadic. It may have taken place with the respect to an abbott of the monastery where Willmann’s workshop realised the order. The analysis of the preserved correspondence between Willmann and the abbot Snopek, as well as the letters sent by the abbot of the Cistercian monastery in Camenz to the painter, his widow and his step-son makes ground for the hypothesis that Willmann presented the projects of the works to the not-Leubus customers using the means of drawings on paper. However, the preparation of such work, referred to in the letters as Entwurf, was restricted to the paintings most important to the founder. Among the six pictures sent to the abbott Snopek, only the painting meant for the main altar of the new monastery church, was proceeded by two, not extant drawings, which were the design of the work. Similarly, out of the eleven pictures ordered for the monastery church in Camenz only The Assumption of Mary from the main altar had been as an Entwurf presented for approval to the abbot Gerard Woi- wode. On the basis of such drawings founders expressed to the artist their opinion of works. The abbott of Camenz, very content of the received work, which most probably was Berlinian Assumption [fig. 10], ordered the execution of the project but außer daß der heyl. Geist, so im oberen Blätthe [. . .] kommt, which was taken into account by the artist in the painting. He accepted drawn Entwurf used to be most probably kept by the founders, or, in the case of signed contract, used to be enclosed with it. From the above presented facts it seems right to conclude that a group of Willmann’s drawings, formally corresponding to the Berlinian Assumption, which means works of relatively completed form, made sometimes on blue paper and characterized by the high degree of conformity with the corresponding Willmann’s paintings — for example Vienna’s Christ Healing the Sick [fig. 11] or signed The Apotheosis of the Great Kurfurst from Braunschweig — are precisely these drawings, which were sent to the foreign founders as Entwurff.

That set of works, constituting a separate formal modus, should be enlarged by the numerous preserved drawn projects to engravings made by mainly Augsburger and Nürnberger engravers. These works represented mostly religious themes, such as a series of illustrations to the Grüssauer Passionbuch, depictions of Cistercian saints, or, realised graphically only in the second half of the 18th century, cycle Joys and Sorrows of St. Joseph. Those drawings, made by Willmann to the order of the editors of the engravings — the abbots of the Cistercians monasteries, especially Bernard Rosa from Grüssau, formally fluctuated from relatively precise, meant
Fig. 12 (below left): M. Willmann, St. Benedict, 1686–88, Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet, Photo by J. Lathion, © Nasjonalgalleriet.

Fig. 13 (above left): M. Willmann, Christ Meeting His Mother, 1678–82, Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, Photo by the gallery.

Fig. 14 (above): M. Willmann, The Apotheosis of Joachim von Sandrart, 1682, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Photo by the Graphische Sammlung Albertina.

Fig. 15 (opposite above): M. Willmann, The Adoration of Mary as Empress and Queen of Austria, 1688, Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet, Photo by J. Lathion, © Nasjonalgalleriet.
for gaining the founder’s acceptance linear Entwurf formula — such as for example the unpublished so far drawing St. Benedict [fig. 12] from the Cistercian saints series — to the fluid, brush-painted sketches, such as Christ Meeting His Mother [fig. 13] from the passion cycle, which resembled in form oil Modelli, made by the artist for his collaborator.

The elaborated form of drawn Entwurf, which as complete drawings surely had an impact on the founder also by the author’s artistic skill, corresponded to a large extent to the formal shape of Willmann’s autonomous drawings. The Apotheosis of Joachim von Sandrart [fig. 14], enclosed with the flattering letter to the author of Teutsche Academie was given the shape surprisingly conformable with the expressed by Sandrart in his work preferences as far as the form of the drawing was concerned. Meticulously elaborated by Willmann foreground with the central figure of Sandrart seems to plead the compliment fleissig used by Sandrart with the respect to the drawings by Dürer and Aldegrever, or the words of appraisal written about Holbein’s antlered works: auf das allerensigne und sorgfallichte. Although the background parts of the drawing were not so elaborated and Willmann, as if knowing Sandrart’s negative attitude to anything unangestritten or wild-durchgangen, self-critically admitted in the letter that the drawing is an villen or ten sehr gestimpt, the drawn Apotheosis must have been so evocative of the skill of the master of Leubus that Sandrart, probably not knowing any other Willmann’s work, decided to place his biography in the Latin edition of his work, published a year later.

The formula of fleissig elaborated pen drawing was most probably utilised by Willmann also in works executed on orders, as independent drawings. The unpublished so far representative drawing, depicting The Adoration of Mary as Empress and Queen [fig. 15] came into being probably on the order of the cardinal Friedrich von Hessen, posed in the bottom left corner of the scene as a worshipper and signed as der Canonicus fridericus. This admirable Willmann’s work was made in 1668 on the occasion of the cardinal’s appointment to the post of cathedral dean in Wroclaw and was probably meant to be presented to the emperor in order to gain his support for Friedrich’s exertions for the post of the bishop of Wroclaw. This must have been the procedure resorted to quite often by the Silesian clergy in order to secure the emperor’s grace because four years later abbot Rosa, pleading with emperor Leopold I as a representative of Silesian states the lowering of taxes, gave the emperor a costly Willmann’s picture The Return of Holy Family from Egypt. If the ordered at Willmann’s drawing really was to be given to the emperor, that meant the highest possible at the time appraisal of the artist’s skill as draughtsman. Treating the drawing, made as Sandrart would have said, mit Kunst und Fleis, as a work which could secure emperor’s support, in fact equalled autonomous drawings by Willmann with his paintings as a form of artistic expression. That high artistic value of the drawing was emphasised by Willmann himself by giving the work truly “pictorial” dimensions (430x620 mm) as well as by signing in the bottom left corner, under the figure of the founder, with the full signature in Latin version, reserved for large-format engravings and more important paintings — works, which as has been written in the biography of the master, made his name widely famous.


(5) L. Ossau, 1994, p. 93.


(9) The letter dated 22nd May 1702 – Státní oblastní archiv, Třebíč, sign. XLVII/4.

(10) Kloss 1934, p. 62.

(11) Aneks do katalogu wystawy »Michael Willmann (1630–1706)«, [Wrocław 1994], No. II.


(18) J. Brayn, On Rembrandt’s Use of Studio-Prep and Model Drawings During the 1630s, in: Essays in Northern European Art presented to Eikert Haesemans-Begemann on his sixtieth birthday, Doornspijk 1983, p. 57.

(19) The letter dated 22nd April 1702 – Státní oblastní archiv.

(20) The letter dated 22nd May 1702 – Státní oblastní archiv.


(24) Skohel 1920, p. 7.


(34) Quotation after: Kloss 1934, p. 149.


(38) Sendraht 1683, p. 393.

Translated by Małgorzata Haładowicz-Grzela

Author:
Andrzej Koziell M. A.
Instytut Historii Sztuki
Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego
ul. Szewska 49
PL-50-139 Wrocław