HOMAGE TO GOLTZIUS: FOUR DISGRACERS IN ONE

Lawrence O. Goedde

The Fralin Art Museum at the University of Virginia was recently given a drawing (fig. 1) based on the work of Hendrick Goltzius that is immediately recognizable as an adaptation of Goltzius’s famous series of engravings, The Four Disgracers, of 1588 (fig. 2).1 Displaying four figures tumbling through the air and seen from unusual angles, Goltzius’s prints, which are based on designs by Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, demonstrate his artistic virtuosity in a variety of ways.2 Not only are the four figures depicted with their limbs splayed out, in poses requiring the use of extreme foreshortening, but each is also carefully composed within the circular field of a tondo format, enhancing the effect of twisting motion through space. The prints display Goltzius’s command of male anatomy in the convoluted poses, which on closer examination are basically the same pose seen from different angles. They also show his skill in manipulating figures in light and shade, with the first and last figures in the series tumbling into dark infernal regions full of billowing clouds of smoke and the middle two plummeting to earth in brilliant sunshine. Adding to the artifice of each image is the manipulation of the swelling and tapering engraved lines, which form concentric, interwoven nets modeling anatomy and clouds, and in the clouds especially create rippling optical effects that further animate the images. The series is a display of virtuosity that bespeaks Goltzius’s intense self-consciousness of his own artistic skills and his determination to produce works that dazzle in their combination of intense visual energy with seemingly effortless control and mastery of difficulty and complexity.3
The still-anonymous draftsman of the Fralin sheet apparently found in Goltzius’s demonstration of artistry both an inspiration and a challenge, since he or she not only set about copying the four figures but also combined them into a single composition. Goltzius’s figures are placed so that the head and an arm of each is at the edges of the group, with the legs and other arm directed toward the center of the composition in a mass of complex foreshortenings. With some effort, the legs, feet, and arms of the original sinners can be traced in the interwoven tangle of limbs, and the artist was for the most part successful in maintaining a plausible three-dimensionality to the grouping, the only exception being an unresolved form between the legs of the figure at left. The overall effect is of a huge three-dimensional pinwheel twisting through space, picking up on the character of the individual figures in Goltzius’s conception. The drawing suggests a response to Goltzius’ challenge not only in the composition but in its technique as well. Nowhere does the draftsman of the Fralin sheet imitate the contrived brilliance of Goltzius’s engraved lines. Goltzius frequently used pen to recreate the swelling and tapering of his engraved lines, directing our attention again to his skilled manipulation of style and technique. Rather, our artist adopted a much less obtrusive, yet equally virtuosic system of modeling flesh that uses parallel hatching strokes of varying degrees of darkness and proximity over passages of wash. Areas of cross-hatching are strikingly minimized, and the parallel hatchings are confined to flesh—hair is rendered mainly with the brush or fluid pen strokes. The result is a work that reveals a clear determination to rival the virtuosity of the original and to some degree succeeds in exceeding Goltzius’s own contrivance, creating a grouping of great artistry, if total implausibility as a depiction of figures actually falling through space.

The response of this draftsman to Goltzius’s engravings, finding in them a challenge to meet and attempt to surpass, can also be seen as an integral feature of Goltzius’s own artistic achievement. The twisting poses seen from extreme angles and the knotty musculature are his responses to the virtuosic treatments of the human figure by his predecessors in Haarlem and by celebrated artists of the Italian Renaissance. Anne Lowenthal discussed a number of sources of inspiration for Goltzius’s Disgracers that scholars have proposed. These include Konrad Oberhuber’s observation of the link between two of Goltzius’s sinners and the falling figures in Dirck Volkertsz. Coornhert’s Allegory of Human Ambition, an etching of 1549 after a design by Maerten van Heemskerck (fig. 3). Lowenthal noted that the resemblance of Goltzius’s Disgracers to the earlier print is both formal and thematic, relating to prideful ambition and its downfall, a theme she found also in the writings of Coornhert. Since Coornhert was an important mentor to
Goltzius, the latter’s awareness of Heemskerck’s strongly classicizing tumbling figures is secure. Lowenthal also discussed Jeroen Giltay’s suggestion of a link between Goltzius’s series and four paintings by Titian depicting mythological figures who suffered condemnation and torment (fig. 4). The series was commissioned by Mary of Hungary and delivered between 1549 and 1556 to her château near Brussels. Two of the paintings, Tityus and Sisyphus, subsequently came into the possession of Philip II of Spain and are in the Prado today. The composition of Tityus was definitely known to Goltzius through an engraving by Cornelis Cort. The art of Michelangelo, too, has been cited as a source of inspiration for the Disgracers (fig. 5). His heroically muscular nude male figures, often in twisting and sometimes falling poses, like those in the Last Judgment, were available to Goltzius in prints by a number of artists (among them Marcantonio Raimondi, Nicholas Beatrizet, and Giorgio Ghisi) before he saw Michelangelo’s originals in Rome in 1590–91, two years after producing the Disgracers.

Goltzius’s adaptations of the writhing, falling, or anguished poses of these admired predecessors can be seen as in effect a dialogue with and development of their achievements. Again indicating his intensely self-conscious attitude toward his own artistry, Goltzius at once echoed and invoked great models and strove to surpass them. This seems to be the case as well with the ambition and artistry evident in the Fralin Museum drawing. However less accomplished this draftsman was, his drawing reveals an artist who saw Goltzius’s virtuoso artistry as a challenge to his own skills and ambitions. That this artist was responding to Goltzius’s work at the level of artistry itself rather than subject matter is evident in his complete elimination of the backgrounds found in the original engravings, which contain settings and narrative allusions to each sinner’s story. His concern was to manipulate Goltzius’s figures into a new work of his own devising, thus demonstrating his own skill.

The function of the Herman Collection drawing nonetheless remains a puzzle. Its apparently self-aware refashioning of Goltzius’s creations and its careful execution seem out of keeping with a work made as a casual exercise; yet the drawing is unsigned, and its purpose is unclear. Such a work could conceivably have served as the model for a print, but, to my knowledge, none is known, and there are no marks to indicate transfer to a plate. It could also have been a presentation drawing, a gift to someone who would appreciate its skill and would perhaps recognize both its models and the draftsman’s clever recasting of his models, but there is no indication on the sheet of such a destination. A dedication or an annotation could have existed on a now-lost mount, but such speculations, while tantalizing, actually bring us no closer to divining its original audience.

Interestingly, Goltzius’s Disgracers continue to find a response in the works of recent artists, who recreate his tumbling figures on a monumental mural scale. These include the street artist, Žilda, whose work Liber Casus comprises outdoor mural posters of individual Disgracers installed in Paris, Rennes, and Belgrade (fig. 6). Another contemporary artist, Baptiste Debombourg, creates monumental mural installations, including one based on Phaeton from the Disgracers, using thousands of staples applied to wood panel as his medium (fig. 7). For both, the artifact of Goltzius’s series clearly provokes, intrigues, and challenges as they adapt his imagery to new purposes. Žilda sees the
falling figures pasted high above passersby in urban settings as destabilizing the familiar world of the streets, provoking reflection on falling as a metaphor for the necessity of risk-taking amid the general indifference and banality of ordinary life. Debombourg finds in the heroic scale of Mannerist male nudes a metaphor for societal, and especially male, violence as seen in popular super-heroes, an aggression and familiarity that he sees as echoed in the way staples are driven into board and their utter ubiquity. However differently these artists respond to the *Disgracers*, the fascinating complexity of Goltzius’s convoluted, tumbling forms remains viscerally suggestive and capable of evoking an artistic response in this generation as it clearly did in the draftsman who created the Fralin’s drawing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the importance to me of Allison Kettering’s inspired expansion of the iconographic study of Dutch art to embrace numerous literary and social dimensions of Dutch seventeenth-century culture, as well as her personal generosity and encouragement over the years.

Larry Goedde is Professor of Art History at the University of Virginia. His publications include Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art: Convention, Rhetoric, and Interpretation (Penn State Press, 1989), and more recently an essay surveying Renaissance and Baroque landscape traditions in A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), and an online exhibition catalogue, “Traces of the Hand: Master Drawings from the Collection of Frederick and Lucy S. Herman” (http://www.virginia.edu/artmuseum/supplemental-websites/traces/index.html).

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Anonymous, after Hendrick Goltzius, after Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *The Four Disgracers*, pen, brown ink, and black chalk, with wash on paper, 40.01 x 45.56 cm. Charlottesville, University of Virginia, The Fralin Art Museum, Gift of the Frederick and Lucy S. Herman Foundation, inv. no. 2007.15.40 (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 2. Hendrick Goltzius, aftert Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *The Four Disgracers: Icarus, Phaeton, Tantalus, and Ixion*, 1588, engraving, diameter varies from 33.0 to 33.2 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953, inv. no. 53.601.338 (3-6) (artwork in public domain)
Figure 3. Dirck Volkertsz. Coornhert, after Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Narrow Path of Virtue*, 1549, etching, 43.3 x 50.7 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, inv. no. I. 1965/133 (PK) (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 4. Titian, *Tityus*, 1548–49, oil on canvas, 253 x 217 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. no. 427 (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 5. Giulio Bonasone, after Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, etching, 62.4 x 44.5 cm. London, The British Museum (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 6. Žilda, *Phaëton*, from *Liber Casus*. 2010, acrylic on paper, pasted onto a wall. Rennes, France (reproduced with the permission of the artist)

Figure 7. Baptiste Debombourg, from *Aggravure*, 2007, staples on board, 2.7 x 2.5 m (reproduced with the permission of the artist)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


---


4 For example, Leeflang and Luijten, Goltzius, nos. 84, 85, 87.


7 Lowenthal, “The Disgracers,” 151.


Recommended Citation: Lawrence O. Goedde, “Homage to Goltzius: Four Disgracers in One,” Midwestern Arcadia: Essays in Honor of Alison Kettering (2015) DOI: 10.18277/makf.2015.02