Gaspar Becerra and the concept of *disegno* in sixteenth-century Spain

Abstract:

Gaspar Becerra (1520-1568) remains a complex figure to evaluate within the history of sixteenth-century art in Spain. Becerra spent over half his career in Italy, engaging with the work of Michelangelo (1475-1564) and undertaking commissions in the workshops of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and Daniele da Volterra (1509-1566). Here he developed a lifelong commitment to drawing.

On his return to Spain in 1557 Becerra found success translating what he had absorbed in Italy into works of architecture, sculpture, and painting for Spanish ecclesiastical and Royal patrons. While much of this work has been lost, a body of drawings remain that demonstrate Becerra's talent for graphic art and the use of drawings in his workshop practice. His two major surviving works, the High Altar Retable of Astorga Cathedral and the ceiling decoration of the Torre de la Reina of the Palacio Real of El Pardo, provide case studies in how he repurposed Italian models into new Spanish contexts. They also demonstrate the importance of drawing to Becerra's process of design and his execution of large commissions.

Apart from the fame of these major works, Becerra's legacy can be seen in the many drawings that were left on his death in 1568. Drawings that were produced across his career and that caused later art theorists to consider the importance of disegno for the future of Spanish art.

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'Gaspar Becerra took away from Berruguete a great part of the glory that the latter had acquired, being celebrated not only in Spain, but also in Italy for having followed Michelangelo and because his figures were more vigorous and had more grandeur. Therefore, the best sculptors and painters of Spain imitated Becerra and followed his path.'[1]

- Antonio Palomino, *Lives of the Eminent Spanish Painters and Sculptors*, 1724

Introduction

Gaspar Becerra (1520-1568) remains a complex figure to evaluate in the art of sixteenth-century Spain. Formed as an artist during an extended stay in Italy, Becerra not only gained exposure to the work of Michelangelo (1475-1564) but also participated in the workshops of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and Daniele da Volterra (1509-1566). On his return to Spain in 1557, Becerra began work on his most iconic creation, the decoration of the High Altar of Astorga Cathedral [Fig.1]. A work causing his older rival Alonso Berruguete (1490-1561) to remark 'Where would this have left me had I not already made my fortune?'[2].

Following his success at Astorga, in 1562 Becerra was appointed painter to King Philip II (1527-1598), entrusted with overseeing the decoration of a number of Royal palaces and the earliest decorative campaign at El Escorial. By the time of the artist's death in 1568 he

[1] Palomino, Antonio, *Lives of the Eminent Spanish Painters and Sculptors*, trans. Nina Ayala Mallory, (Cambridge, 1987). p.18.
[2] Martínez, Jusepe*, Practical Discourses On The Most Noble Art Of Painting*, trans. Zahira Veliz (Los Angeles, 2017). p.143.

was considered the leading artist of his generation. Eclipsing both Berruguete and Pedro Machuca (1490-1550), two artists who, like Becerra, had found in Italy a new artistic language that would change the course of the arts in Spain.

However, despite Becerra's achievements being recorded in the seventeenth-century art treatises of Francisco Pacheco (1564-1644), Vicente Carducho (c.1576-1638), and Jusepe Martínez (1600-1682), and, in Antonio Palomino's 1724 literary pantheon of Spanish artists, Becerra's influence and reputation appeared to some of these same authors to decline as quickly as it had risen. Surpassed by the arrival of a new generation of artists from Italy, led by Federico Zuccaro (1539-1609) and Pellegrino Tibaldi (1529-1596), with ideas that would eventually lead to the growth of a freer and more expressive style, a precursor to the artistic achievements of the early seventeenth century in Spain[3].

A factor that has also weighed upon the later reception of Becerra's art is the relatively low survival rate of his works. In Italy his collaboration on major commissions with other artists has inevitably obscured the unique contribution of Becerra's own hand. Even the few independent easel paintings are the subject of contested attributions, given the closeness of his style to his Italian teachers and collaborators[4]. In Spain, his work has fared little better. His major sculptural work at Astorga aside, the decoration of Royal palaces that occupied much of his Spanish career have been lost both to fire and to the

[3] McDonald, Mark P., *Renaissance to Goya Prints and Drawings from Spain*, Exhib. cat., The British Museum, (London, 2012). p.75.
[4] See Carlo Falciani's discussion of the Allegory of Patience, which exists in a number of versions that have at varying times been ascribed to Vasari, Becerra and others: Falciani, Carlo, *Vasari, Michelangelo and the Allegory of Patience*, (London, 2020).

ever-changing taste of his Royal patrons. The only major survival in this area is the decoration of the Torre de la Reina in the Palace of El Pardo, a Royal hunting lodge outside Madrid [Fig.2].

In contrast to these major commissions one small but important body of works to have survived are Becerra's drawings. While these too have suffered the consequences of time and neglect, the surviving corpus of works are second only to Berruguete's drawings, both in terms of quantity and what they reveal about the absorption of Italian artistic traditions into sixteenth-century Spanish visual culture.

Amongst recent scholarship it is only the Astorga Retable that can generally be found in surveys of Spanish sixteenth-century art, and the Retable continues to provide a focus for scholars such as Carmen Fracchia to investigate the impact of Italian art on the Iberian Peninsula. In this regard Gonzalo Redín Michaus's work *Pedro Rubiales, Gaspar Becerra Y Los Pintores Españoles en Roma, 1527-1600* has provided further stimulus to this debate. The restoration in 2001-2003 of the El Pardo decorations brought a new focus on the secular aspects of Becerra's output, with a thorough reading of the frescoes provided by Carmen García-Frías Checa in 2005. There has also been significant renewed interest in the field of Spanish sixteenth-century drawings, with major exhibitions held in Madrid in 2016 and in Florence in 2018. However, in these exhibitions and the accompanying publications Becerra's contribution battles for attention against the larger output of artists such as Berruguete, and Becerra has yet to receive a monograph volume or major exhibition dedicated to his work.

In this context, the aim of this dissertation will be to focus on Becerra's drawings and to consider the extent to which they support the claims for his artistic achievements made by Becerra's early biographers. In particular, it will test the assertion that his talent was moulded on his closeness to Michelangelo, weighing the contribution of other Roman artists whose techniques and workshop practices were to be highly influential on the development of both Becerra's style and his creative process. Lastly, it will assess Palomino's most hubristic claim that Becerra, with Berruguete, banished 'the barbarous and ignorant old manner' from Spanish art replacing it with 'the true light of art, so that men of talent could move forward by cultivating it with study, thought, and practice'[5]. A reference to Becerra's part in introducing to Spanish artists the Italian concept of disegno, with its dual meanings of design and drawing, and of intellectual intent and artistic practice[6].

Before beginning this analysis, it would be useful to briefly consider the position of drawing in Spain in the sixteenth century. An artistic medium that, in a similar fashion to Becerra's art, is largely defined by issues of loss and survival.

First, the relative scarcity of Spanish drawings from this period can lead to the conclusion that Spanish artists preferred to work directly, without preliminary drawings. But this may simply be a case of misreading their absence. Mark McDonald has argued forcefully that drawings were indeed a key preparatory stage for Iberian artists and that their non-

[5] Palomino, p.18.
[6] Dickerson, C.D. and McDonald, Mark P., *Alonso Berruguete First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain*, Exhib. cat., National Gallery of Art and the Meadows Museum, (Washington D.C. and Dallas, 2020). p.64.

survival is in large part a factor of the 'fragility of the supports and the functional nature of the individual works, often discarded after use'[7].

Second, a consequence of this loss is the difficulty in identifying a distinctive Spanish style of drawing. A difficulty compounded by the absence in Spain of cultural centres of learning, leaving artistic production almost entirely dependent on the concerns and tastes of local patrons. A stimulus for this situation to change was the decision to end the peripatetic nature of the Spanish court which in 1561 finally settled in Madrid. But these changes came long after artistic networks and academies had become well established elsewhere in Europe.

In this context Spain was a country that sought to import artists rather than export them, allowing foreign artists to foster what Lizzie Boubli has termed 'a Southern European sensibility' in place of a distinctive national idiom. Boubli has further argued that a distinction should be drawn between 'Spanish drawings' and 'drawings made in Spain'. This should ensure that drawings are interrogated to identify whether they represent something specifically Spanish or whether they are the product of this broader international context and cultural exchange. Lizzie Boubli has described the situation in Spain as 'idiosyncratic' and a style that reflects an evolving artistic dialogue[8]. These considerations would appear critical when considering the achievements of Gaspar Becerra. An artist whose career was evenly divided between Italy and Spain, and who

[7] Faietti M., Mozzati T., and Gallori C., *Spagna e Italia in dialogo nell'Europa del Cinquecento*, Exhibit. cat., Galleria degli Uffizi, (Florence, 2018). p.39.
[8] Faietti, Mozzati & Gallori, p.41.

practiced one of the most portable and fungible forms of artistic production, the art of drawing.

1. Italy and the school of disegno

Born in 1520 in the Andalusian city of Baeza to a family of local painters, relatively little is known of Becerra's life before his arrival in Italy in the early 1540s. It is likely that his early formation took place within the family workshop, as by 1544 his name appeared in the *Libro antico degl'accademici ed aggregate* of the Roman Accademia de San Luca, for which he would have been expected to have already produced works of public note[9].

But as has already been noted Becerra's journey to Italy was by no means unique. Spanish-born artists travelling to Italy to further their education formed part of a long tradition of high-level cultural exchange. A pattern that would increase further as Habsburg rulers consolidated their political gains across Europe. Piers Baker-Bates has argued that the coronation of Charles V in Bologna in 1530 providing a significant stimulus to this phenomenon, opening the entire court, wherever they were from, 'to the riches and potentialities of the Italian Renaissance'[10]. By the time Becerra arrived in Italy much of the peninsula was under direct or indirect Spanish rule, and a great many of the new commissions offered to Italian artists were moulded by the tastes, beliefs, and practices of Spanish patrons.

While there was little flow of notable Italian artists making anything other than short sojourns in the opposite direction, this was largely due to perceptions of Spain offering

[9] Garcia-Frías Checa, Carmen, *Gaspar Becerra y las pinturas de la Torre de la Reina el el Palacio de El Pardo. Una nueva lectura tras su restauración*, (Madrid, 2005). p.12.
[10] Baker-Bates, Piers and Pattenden, Miles, eds., *The Spanish Prescence in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, (London, 2015). p.129.

only limited commercial opportunities rather than a judgement on Spanish taste or learning. On the contrary, there was a long-standing view in Italy that their Iberian neighbours were distinctly more serious and pious, and this impacted artistic production intended for Spain, most notably in the work of Sebastiano del Piombo (1485-1547). As a consequence, Spanish artists were often given privileged access and were celebrated in Italy.[11]

Among those artists that had preceded Becerra on this journey, it is Alonso Berruguete that Palomino reports provided direct inspiration for Becerra, claiming that having seen the influence of Michelangelo on Berruguete's art Becerra 'decided to go to Rome where he could drink from the source'. Palomino goes on to relay that once in Rome Becerra studied 'the antique statues and reliefs and the works of Michelangelo, of whom he became a disciple, although he also followed Raphael of Urbino' and 'acquired a manner that was better still than Berruguete's, because his figures were fleshier and more graceful in their outlines.' [12]. While Palomino's narrative, written almost two hundred years after these events, is heavily reliant on the earlier views of Pacheco and Martínez, and on the observation of works that Becerra produced on his return to Spain, it is clear that the objective of Palomino's text was to position Becerra as a disciple of Michelangelo. Much the same way as Berruguete had been described, establishing these two artists as the Spanish-born sources for the introduction of Michelangelo's style and ideas into Spanish art. However, while Palomino's narrative may be appealing, its polemical nature calls for a deeper interrogation. For although there is evidence of Berruguete's direct contact with

[11] Ames-Lewis, Frances and Joannides, Paul, eds. *Reactions to the Master: Michelangelo's effect on Art and Artists in the Sixteen Century*, (Abingdon, 2003). p.211.
[12] Palomino, p.18.

Michelangelo during the time he spent in Florence and Rome (c.1504/08 - 1517), the nature of Becerra's relationship with Michelangelo is much less clear[13]. There is no direct evidence that Becerra met Michelangelo or joined the small circle of Michelangelo's direct followers.

Vasari recorded Becerra's earliest activity, citing him for the first time in the *Life of Cristoforo Gherardi* as one of the 'many other friends and artists' who assisted in the fresco cycle he produced for the Cancellaria's Sala dei Cento Giorni in 1545-46[14]. Vasari went on to recount in his own *Life* that it was through this commission that Becerra and his compatriot Pedro de Rubiales (1511-1582) 'laboured much in it in my company, gaining no little experience'[15]. Although Vasari also stated that he regretted the amount he left to assistants and wished that he had executed it all in his own hand, this experience of working on a large commission under the direction of a more experienced artist such as Vasari would have been a valuable learning exercise for the young Becerra.

Most importantly this collaboration would have thoroughly exposed Becerra to Vasari's concept of disegno. A conception of drawing that Vasari would go on to describe at the beginning of his treatise on painting as 'none other than a visible expression and declaration of our inner conception'[16]. Patricia Lee Rubin has described this Vasarian idea

[13] Vasari, Giorgio, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1568*, (Florence, 1966-71). p.869.
[14] Vasari p.896.
[15] Vasari p.1237.
[16] Vasari, Giorgio, *Vasari On Technique*, transl. Louisa S. Maclehose, (London, 1907). p.205.

of disegno more simply as 'that aspect of artistic skill in which theory and practice combine, hand and intellect meet'[17].

Becerra would have seen the application of this skill in the 'many drawings' that Vasari provided in the planning and contractual negotiations for the commission, even though Vasari recounts that many of these designs were not eventually executed. Becerra would also have been a recipient of the cartoons Vasari created for his assistants to turn into frescoed images. Whatever Vasari's later regrets, these cartoons allowed for the rapid decoration of a large area, with a high degree of stylistic unity. A process of intellectual conception, realised through the skill of drawing that would be an essential part of Becerra's later working method. In this regard it is also important to note that Vasari did not see drawing just as the creative keystone for painted images. His conception of disegno was far broader, calling disegno 'the father of our three arts, architecture, sculpture and painting'. The critical link between idea and execution that underpinned the broad range of work that Vasari undertook in Italy and that Becerra would execute on his return to Spain.

While Vasari's overall stylistic control and the large number of artists at work in the Sala dei Cento Giorni make it hard to attribute individual elements of the fresco to any one artist, Carmen Fracchia has made a convincing case for seeing Becerra's hand in the figure of *Opulence* [Fig.3]. A model most probably derived from a figure that Vasari had already used in the *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* at Monteolivieto in Naples [Fig.4].

[17] Rubin, Patricia Lee, *Giorgio Vasari Art and History*, (New Haven and London, 1995). p.241

However, Fracchia argues that the portrayal of Opulence departs from Vasari's manner in its soft modelling and exaggerated volumes. In this regard it appears to have been influenced by the figures of the caryatids used by Daniele da Volterra in the decoration of the Orsini Chapel in the Church of Santissima Trinità dei Monti, now known only through print copies [Fig.5]. For Fracchia the evidence that secures the attribution of Opulence to Becerra is the development of figures with the same approach to physiological volume in later works such as the Venus figure Becerra produced for Juan Valverdes's (1525-1587) *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* (1556) and the figure of *Vigilance* in the Astorga Retable [Fig.6][Fig.7]. In imbuing these Vasarian models with a new monumentality in the modelling of the human body, Becerra appears to be taking his first steps towards his own stylistic conception[18].

Daniele's work in the Orsini Chapel was not completed until 1547, sometime after the Sala dei Cento Giorni frescoes, implying that Becerra was already known to Daniele before this time and given access to his work. Becerra clearly had established a relationship with Daniele, as Vasari reports that shortly after the completion of the Orsini Chapel, Daniele employed Becerra for the decoration of the della Rovere Chapel, also at Santissima Trinità dei Monti. The work on this commission began in the summer of 1548 and brought together a team of artists that included Giovanni Paolo Rossetti (1519-1586), Pellegrino Tibaldi (1527-1596), Michele Alberti (c.1530-~) and Marco Pino (1521-1583).

[18] Fracchia, Carmen, La herencia italiana de Gaspar Becerra en el retablo mayor de la Catedral de Astorga, in *Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte,* (U.A.M.). Vols. IX-X, (Madrid, 1997-1998). p.139.

The chapel was to be decorated with scenes from the life of the Virgin, and again was an example of a collective effort under Daniele's leadership. Vasari reports that the compartments of the chapel were divided by stucco work and that Daniele provided cartoons for the work undertaken by Tibaldi and Pino, and separately requested Becerra to produce a scene of *The Birth of the Virgin* in one of the chapel's lunettes [Fig.8] [19]. While from Vasari's account it might appear that Becerra worked on this lunette alone, a preparatory drawing in the collection of the Uffizi has been ascribed by David Jaffé and Andrea Zezza to the hand of Marco Pino [Fig.9][20].

While scholars have debated the degree to which Marco Pino and his drawing were influenced by the work of Daniele, Tibaldi, Francesco Salviati (1510-1562) and even his first master Domenico Beccafumi (1486-1551). Carmen Fracchia has highlighted the direct impact of Pino's drawing on Becerra, in particular the degree of spatial distortion, the tilting forward of the scene and the enlargement of the central figures[21]. All characteristics that can also be seen in a further collaboration that Becerra undertook with Daniele and his assistants, a frieze of the story of Bacchus, undertaken around the same time as the first phase of work at the Rovere Chapel in 1547-1548. Gonzalo Redín Michaus has suggested that the scene of *Pentheus being dismembered by the Maenads* should be attributed to the same artist as *The Birth of the Virgin* [Fig.10]. His argument focuses on the similarity of the anatomical volumes of the main figures and the marked likeness between the woman bearing the water jug in *The Birth of the Virgin* and the Maenad pulling

[19] Vasari, p.1019.
[20] Redín Michaus, G., *Pedro Rubiales, Gaspar Becerra Y Los Pintores Españoles En Roma*, (Madrid, 2007). p.166.
[21] Fracchia 1997-1998. p.141.

at Pentheus's right leg in the Bacchus frieze[22]. If this attribution is accepted it would again suggest a close association with Marco Pino, who Daniele had entrusted with a number of scenes within the Frieze[23]. What makes Pino even more interesting for Becerra is that before taking a leading role in Daniele's workshop he had worked closely with Perino del Vaga (1501-1547) on the decoration of the Farnese apartments at Castel Sant' Angelo. An encounter that can be seen in the works Pino produced at Palazzo Farnese and brings a further association with the workshop of Raphael into the ambit of Becerra's development.

Scholars have suggested several other commissions that Becerra participated in during his association with Daniele's workshop, most notably the decoration of the Sala Regia within the Vatican and the building and decoration of Palazzo Capodiferro (now Palazzo Spada)[24]. However, the purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive assessment of Becerra's Roman projects but to draw attention to the rich network of Roman artists that Becerra was exposed to. While some had been active participants in Raphael's workshop and others had direct, ongoing relationships with Michelangelo, these artists were not merely copyists of their masters' art. They were not content to follow Vasari's simple dictum 'try to imitate Michelangelo in everything you do'[25]. Rather, they were creatively engaged in the imitation and reinterpretation of the models they had received from Michelangelo and Raphael.

[22] Redín Michaus, p.169-170.
[23] Morel, Philippe. 'Il fregio di Bacco Daniele di Volterra nel Palazzo Farnese di Roma' in *Il fregio dipinto nelle decorazioni romane del Cinquecento*, (Rome, 2016). pp.131-155.
[24] Redín Michaus, p.173.
[25] Vasari, p.1057.

Morten Steen Hansen has described the approach of Perino, Daniele and Tibaldi as 'going well beyond the relatively straightforward Vasarian scenario of the continuation of excellence through reverent imitation'[26]. These artists, he argues, were in the process of developing their own identities, and even where they aimed at reflecting their illustrious forebears, they brought their own modes of expression to the task. It is in this context that Becerra found himself, not only absorbing the art of those who have traditionally be ascribed as workshop leaders, such as Vasari and Daniele da Volterra, but also those close collaborators such as Marco Pino and Pellegrino Tibaldi. A group of artists, linked by their association with the decoration of Santissima Trinità dei Monti, whose impact would also weigh on the development of Becerra's independent style[27].

[26] Steen Hansen, Morten, *In Michelangelo's Mirror*, (Pennsylvania, 2913). p.6
[27] Ames-Lewis & Joannides, p.218.

2. Michelangelo and the school of drawing

Alongside the theoretical engagement with disegno in mid-sixteenth century Roman art, Becerra was also exposed in these projects to disegno's practical aspects, especially the importance of preparatory drawings and cartoons in the creative process and the management of large workshop commissions. As has already been noted, the low survival rate of early Spanish drawings would suggest that the graphic arts were seen largely as a means to an end, rather than as significant intermediate steps in the creative process, with a potential secondary life beyond the finished artwork[28]. Becerra would have witnessed a very different approach in the workshops of Vasari and Daniele where drawings were produced by their own hand both to realise their artistic vision and to provide a tool to manage the large team of artists working on their most significant commissions.

Becerra would also encounter a third use of graphic art, those drawings that appeared to have the status of fully independent artworks, the 'disegni finiti' or presentation drawings of Michelangelo. Although it cannot be determined whether Becerra had access to Michelangelo's original drawings, he was certainly acquainted with Giulio Clovio who had made several faithful copies of the presentation drawings, preserving the highly finished modelling of the originals[29].

One of Becerra's earliest extant drawings connected to a known painting is his study of the Risen Christ in the collection of the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice [Fig.11]. This

[28] Faietti, Mozzati & Gallori, p.60.
[29] A letter from Clovio to Vasari dated 2 April 1547 referred to Becerra as 'il mio govan Bizeri'. Frey (1923-40), I, pp.196-197, letter no.93; cited in Ames-Lewis & Joannides, p.222.

was part of a decorative scheme for the church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli and represented Christ's descent into limbo [Fig.12]. Although the fresco (now detached and in Castel Sant' Angelo) was completed by Giulio Mazzoni (1525-1618) following Becerra's return to Spain, the preparatory drawing shows a high degree of familiarity with both Michelangelo's refined chalk drawing technique and his approach to the representation of the human body. In this drawing Becerra recreates what Boubli has termed 'the trembling of flesh under light and shade', characteristic of Michelangelo's drawings of *Ideal Heads*[30]. In his depiction of Christ's body Becerra's careful use of fine chalk lines reconciles the figure's powerful, muscular form with the appearance of being suspended, weightless in space. This drawing also expresses Becerra's knowledge of the range of figures that Michelangelo deployed in the Last Judgement. Although Becerra's figure of Christ might seem as if it has been detached from the Sistine wall, it is in fact a work entirely of Becerra's invention. This recasting of Michelangelo's idiom within a new composition is precisely what Steen Hanson highlights when describing how Daniele drew on the language of the Last Judgment in his portrayal of the *Deposition* in the Orsini Chapel[31].

Becerra's relationship with the Last Judgement can be seen most fully in two drawings in the collections of the Prado and Bibliotheca Nacional de Espana [Fig.13][Fig.14]. These sheets are careful copies of sections of the Sistine fresco. Possibly created as preparatory drawings for an engraving of the Last Judgment, they both faithfully record every detail of the structure of the composition, and they convey the painterly effects Michelangelo

[30] Ames-Lewis & Joannides, p.219.
[31] Steen Hansen, p.60.

used to imbue the figures with a sense of pathos and terribilità. Xavier de Salas has argued that the quality of these drawings supports the idea that Becerra copied them from Michelangelo's own preparatory drawings[32]. This would be surprising given how few of Michelangelo's studies for this fresco have survived. It would also imply that Becerra had access to Michelangelo, an assumption for which there is no other available evidence. A more likely hypothesis is that Becerra produced these drawings from painstaking observation, an argument that is supported by the existence of drawings by Becerra of single figures from the fresco, such as the sheet portraying Dimas, the good thief, now in collection of the Uffizi [Fig.15].

Leaving aside the idea that the drawings of the Last Judgement were intended for reproductive printmaking, these studies from the Sistine Chapel demonstrate Becerra's growing confidence in his handling of the human form. An ability that Becerra would show to full effect with the figures he provided for the frontispiece of the Spanish edition of Juan Valverde's *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* (1556), after Andrea Vesalius's (1514-1564) *De humani corpus fabrica* (1543) [Fig.16]. In Becerra's work, two male nudes hold the coat of arms of the Cardinal of Santiago de Compostela, replacing two skeletons in Versalius's original. The nude on the left appears to be a development of the figure of Dimas, and the two angels holding the cardinal's hat have a muscular physiognomy that are a hallmark of Becerra's maturing style[33].

[32] Salas, Xavier de, 'Dos dibujos del Juicio Final de Miguel Angel', *L'Arte*, 5, 1969. pp.117-122.
[33] Garcia-Frías Checa, p.110.

The extent to which Becerra provided drawings for the illustrations within Valverdes's volume is the subject of some scholarly debate, given in many instances the close parallels with Versalius's original. However, there is no doubt that in the sixteenth century Becerra was credited with a profound understanding of anatomy, gained from his time in Italy. Jusepe Martínez would later write on the art of anatomy:

'The ancients and in homage to them our moderns also, have created figures of anatomy in the rounds with excellent action, using the drawings of Michelangelo and Donatello, and they can be seen in casts made by the lost wax method. The best are by Giambologna, our own great Becerra...'[34]

This facet of his reputation clearly persisted as Palomino also called Becerra 'a great anatomist', recounting that he processed a terracotta model of a left leg by Becerra that was useful for both painters and surgeons[35].

Whatever the truth of the situation, the frontispiece alone shows Becerra's facility to give his figures both a classical grandeur and a perceived sense of anatomical accuracy, mastered through the study of Michelangelo. It is this perception that would be central to Becerra's reputation on his return home to Spain.

[34] Martínez, p.45.
[35] Palomino, p.18.

3. Astorga and the practise of disegno

Becerra arrived back in Spain in 1557, and by the end of that year he was recorded as living in Valladolid[36]. Not an unsurprising choice as in the summer of 1556 he had married Paula Veláquez (d. 1569), whose family came from the nearby town of Tordesillas. Valladolid was also the capital of Castille and an important commercial centre, which brought additional opportunities for an artist needing to build his reputation in Spain.

It was in Valladolid in 1558 that Becerra won the competition to create a new high altar retable for the Cathedral of Astorga. Among his competitors for the commission were Juan Picardo (1506-1576) and Pedro Andrés (dates unknown), who had recently completed work on the Retable of the Cathedral of Burgo de Osma with Juan de Juni (1506-1577) and another group that included Berruguete's pupil Manuel Alvarez (1517-1587)[37]. Becerra's victory is in many ways surprising. He not only submitted the highest bid, but he also had no experience of managing a project of this complexity in Spain. This potential deficit may well have actually played to his advantage, as it is clear that while both of his competitors were trained in the traditional plateresque style of Spanish church decoration, only Becerra had been exposed to the latest forms of art developed in Italy.

[36] Garcia-Frías Checa, p.110.
[37] Arias Martínez, Manuel, ed., *El Retablo Mayor de la Catedral de Astorga Historia y Restauración*, (Salamanca, 2001). p.17.

Artists such as Berruguete and Diego de Siloé (1495-1563) had created retables in Valladolid (1526-1532) and Burgos (1523-1524) respectively, that displayed a new, confident use of Italianate all'antica architectural forms. In Burgos Cathedral's Chapel of the Condestable, Siloé had already produced the first superimposition of freestanding Ionic and Doric columns constructed in Spain, and in his 1522 contract for a Chapel of Saint Anna in the Church of Garcia de Medina the church authorities stipulated the work was to be 'carved and decorated in the Roman fashion'. However, much of the experimentation with this new architectural language produced works that superimposed 'the language of the orders on the ornamental repertoires of classical or Late Gothic origins'[38]. As a result, no altarpiece as rigorously devoted to the classical orders and on the scale of the Astorga commission had been contemplated before in Spain.

While the contract signed by Becerra and the Chapter of Astorga Cathedral does not dictate the aesthetic style of the finished work, the copious references to terms such as 'classical orders', 'architraves', and 'cornices' show the extent to which Becerra and his clients had achieved what Tommaso Mozzati has termed a 'perfect bilingualism' in their expectations for the Retable[39]. Their desire for an essentially Roman conception of the altarpiece, grounded in a classical architectonic form, was also made explicit in the architectural drawing that Becerra provided to accompany the contract. A drawing in fragmentary form in the Biblioteca Nacional de España may well be the model Becerra provided [Fig.17].

[38] Plaza, Carlos, 'Architecture of the Retablo between Spain and Italy' in Artistic Circulation between Early Modern Spain and Italy, Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio and Tomasso Mozzati eds, (New York, 2020). pp.56-77.
[39] Faietti, Mozzati & Gallori, p.90.

The use of a detailed architectural design was important to the Astorga authorities, not just to clarify their requests, but also to ensure that the agreement they had entered into with Becerra would be accurately reflected in the final work. The clarity of this drawing, capable of moving from the contractual negotiations directly to the workshop for execution was also a significant development in Spanish practice. An example of what had gone before is the plan Juan Guas (1430-1496) provided for the chancel of the Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes in Toledo [Fig.18]. This large perspectival drawing, with its detailed rendering of the chapel decoration, would certainly have enabled Guas to explain his ideas to his patrons. But this work could not be considered an executable design to be used in the realisation of the final work.

A better-preserved architectural drawing by Becerra is the plan for the Retable of the Church of the Descalzas Reales, Madrid's new Royal convent founded by Joanna of Austria in 1559 [Fig.19]. This highly finished drawing in pen, ink and wash was created in 1563 and demonstrates how quickly the ideas that Becerra was exploring in the relative backwater of Astorga were being transmitted to the Court in Madrid. A further innovation can be seen in this drawing in the two detachable flaps of paper that were attached across the middle of the sheet [Fig.20]. Under these flaps, which provide an unbroken architectural line, are female allegorical figures representing Fortitude and Religion. This device allowed Becerra to offer his patrons choices when discussing the

commission. The tabernacle was drawn on a separate sheet and pasted onto the final drawing, suggesting that here too there would have been alternative designs available[40].

The clarity of the Descalzas drawing also reveals a debt to Michelangelo in Becerra's approach to architectural design. Notice, for example, his treatment of the central niche in both the Descalzas and Astorga drawings and their similarity to the niches Michelangelo created at the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome [Fig.21]. The figures of Fortitude and Religion also appear to echo the figures of Dusk and Dawn that Michelangelo had provided for the New Sacristy in Florence, and other similar reclining figures in Daniele da Volterra's stucco work frieze in the Sala Regia.

Returning to Astorga, although the contract did not articulate the stylistic treatment of the figures to be sculpted, the Cathedral Chapter did require Becerra to first produce the central figure of the Assumption of the Virgin [Fig.22]. Only when the Chapter were satisfied with this work would Becerra be allowed to continue with the commission, and with the stipulation that all the other figures were to be completed in the same sculptural idiom. The work that Becerra produced owes much the fresco of the Assumption painted by Daniele da Volterra in the Rovere Chapel at Santissma Trinità dei Monti. A fresco whose success was marked by its early transmission through the medium of prints, and the production of painted copies that were soon circulating in Spain[41]. However, Becerra's work was not a slavish copy of Daniele's composition. Instead, Becerra gave the Virgin a new monumentality, in keeping with the style he had developed in his

[40] McDonald, p.72.
[41] Copies of this image had already arrived in the Sacristy of Palencia Cathedral and in the Royal collection now housed at El Escorial. See Aras 2001, pp.39-44.

Roman painting and befitting the Virgin's status as the titular patron of Astorga Cathedral. Becerra also exaggerated the tilt of the Virgin's head and changed the gesture of her hands to imply a greater sense of movement within the figure. The putti lifting the Virgin towards heaven and those swirling above her head were also given a new anatomical musculature, increasing their veracity.

It should also be noted that both Becerra's conception of the Assumption and the compositional order of his architectural design met the test of greater narrative clarity. A key artistic impulse of the Counter Reformation, albeit within the very Spanish context of the gilded and polychromed retable. Becerra's heroic, unambiguous Roman figures were therefore preferred both aesthetically and doctrinally over the gothic complexity of his predecessors[42].

Unsurprisingly the Astorga authorities were pleased with the result, although perhaps as a sign of the novel nature of the project they had undertaken they asked Berruguete to give his opinion on the sculpture. Pedro de Arbulo (d. 1608), Becerra's chief assistant, claimed that Berruguete remarked it was 'the best figure ever made in Spain' and the Cathedral Chapter were certainly happy to let Becerra continue with his work[43]. Under the terms of the contract, the altarpiece was to be carved first and polychromed at a later date. The initial phase was scheduled to take only two years, with Becerra providing drawings and three-dimensional models, leaving the specialised skill of wood carving to a team led by Arbulo and Juan Fernández de Vallejo (d. 1601). To undertake a task of this size in a

[42] Trusted, Marjorie, *The Arts of Spain – Iberia and Latin America 1450-1700* (London, 2007). p.38.
[43] Dickerson and McDonald, p.179.

relatively short timeframe Becerra would have had to rely heavily both on talent of the workshop he had assembled and on his own archive of inventions that he had acquired in Italy.

If the central image of the Assumption made clear Becerra's ability to creatively translate an image he had studied in Rome into a new setting, this aptitude was to become the working method for much of the Astorga Retable. The image of the Pietà provides an interesting case study of Becerra's approach [Fig.23]. Here Becerra draws on two images from the presentation drawings of Michelangelo.

Firstly, the figure of Mary with her arms outstretched in grief and shock would appear to draw on the same figure in the Pietà Michelangelo drew for Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547). Whether Becerra had seen and copied the original work or possessed a print of the image by Nicolás Beatrizet (1507-1565) is unknown. Becerra may even have seen Giulio Clovio's painted miniature, as Clovio can already be seen changing the angle of the Virgin's head to a more downward position and filling in the background with a number of other figures, as Becerra would need to do to make a workable relief for the retable [Fig. 24].

The second aspect of the Pietà is the figure of Christ. Here Becerra appears to have turned to a more surprising source, Michelangelo's drawing of a Children's Bacchanal, created in 1533 for Tommaso Cavalieri (1509-1587) [Fig.25]. The figure of the male nude slumped and possibly drunk, in the lower right corner, bears a striking similarity in his posture to the figure of Christ. His head bent forward, and his lifeless arms supported by

the Virgin's knees. Again, Becerra may have produced a copy of this drawing in Rome or have been in possession of a print, as two editions of the image were published during Becerra's time in Rome, by Enea Vico (1523-1567) in 1546 and Nicolàs Beatrizet in 1553.

In his repertoire of sources for the Astorga commission Becerra was not only indebted to Michelangelo and his circle. Manuel Arias has identified the influence of prints by Marcantonio Raimondi (1480-1534) after designs by Raphael, most notably the figure of Saint Judas Tadeo which appears to follow closely a print of Saint Thomas [Figs. 26 and 27][44]. The secondary decoration also bears witness to Becerra's exposure to sources of antique decoration such as the *Domus Aurea* and the use that Raphael and his collaborators made of them in the stucco work decoration of the Vatican Loggia. Elements such as Lorenzetto's (1490-1541) stucco relief of *Victory* from the Vatican Loggia is used to decorate the columns of the first order of the retable. The figure and its palm fronds transposed to wrap around the columns, its pagan meaning subverted to symbolise the victory of the Eucharist [Figs. 28 and 29]. In some respects, this all'antica imagery must have been at the boundaries of acceptability in Counter-Reformation Spain. It is notable that the allegorical female figure of Faith was originally carved as a nude figure, her nakedness a sign of her purity, however, the figure was later covered with the addition of drapery[45].

In commenting on the success of the Astorga Retable and Becerra's work at the Descalzas Reales, Pacheco observed, as if echoing Vasari, that Becerra 'demonstrated well

[44] Aras 2001, p.46
[45] Trusted, p.28.

his rare talent and his understanding of those arts, for they involve painting, sculpture and architecture'[46]. The linked nature of these arts was also a theme in Martínez's commentary, where he declared that Becerra 'allied painting with sculpture in a closer union than many other painters who have worked in both arts, because until this time nobody had managed this harmony of union'[47]. However, what underpins Becerra's talent, and his acclaim, was his use of drawing: in the conception of the work as a whole, in the use of images and ideas brought from his time in Italy and, just as importantly, as a tool for the direction of his workshop who were responsible for much of the final execution.

[46] Palomino, p.19.
[47] Martínez, p.142.

4. El Pardo and the art of the Court

Following Becerra's success at Astorga, Martínez informs his readers that the artist then went to kiss the hand of Philip II in Madrid, where he would be commissioned to complete a number of rooms at the new Royal palace of El Pardo. A work in which Martínez reports 'he exceeded anything in painting and sculpture done up to that time creating a splendid decoration'[48].

However, Becerra's appointment as a royal painter was not only down to the fame of Astorga. Juan Bautista de Toledo (1515-1567) who had worked in Rome with Michelangelo on the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica, and no doubt knew Becerra or at least his work, had been recalled to Spain by Philip in 1559. By 1561 Juan Bautista had been appointed as royal architect and given overall charge of both the construction and the decoration of all Philip's Royal residences. Prior to this appointment Philip had ordered changes to the external appearance of El Pardo, specifying that the roof of the Palace should be rebuilt in slate to take on a more Netherlandish design. However, following Juan Bautista's appointment, the interior of the palace was to move in a very different direction with an altogether more Italianate perspective. Given the difficulty in attracting artists from Italy to participate in these lengthy projects, Becerra, with his profound experience of Roman painting, was a perfect choice for the El Pardo commissions.

[48] Martínez, p.143.

When Becerra arrived at El Pardo at the beginning of 1563, the decoration was already underway, in the hands of Flemish artists such as Antonio Pupiler (active 1550-1567). It is thought that Pupiler, who had not studied the fresco technique, painted simulated frescoes on canvas supports that were then applied to the architectural structure. But Becerra brought with him the skill of 'buon fresco' as attested to by the supplies of pigments he ordered from Italy and Flanders[49]. This allowed the painted images to be incorporated into a variety of elaborate gilded stucco mouldings.

With the decoration of two of the towers already advanced by 1563 Becerra was given charge of the southwest tower, which formed part of the Queen's apartments within the Palace. For the choice of the decorative scheme, El Pardo' s use as rural hunting and recreational residence lent itself perfectly to allegorical narratives, rich in allusions to nature and drawn from classical texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The specific decision to focus on the narrative of Perseus may well have been made with the direct involvement of Philip, who owned annotated editions of Ovid's tale[50]. He was also exploring the pictorial possibilities of Ovid's narrative, replete with female nudes and warrior heroes, in the cycle of paintings that he had commissioned from Titian in 1550[51]. The survival and prominence of the essentially religious decoration of El Escorial has possibly obscured to later eyes Philip's interest in these profane subjects, which were much in evidence in his numerous royal residences in and around Madrid and Segovia.

[49] On 5 June 1563 Becerra received the first shipment of pigments from Italy, which had been procured by the Spanish Ambassador in Genoa, Gómez Suárez de Figueroa (c.1520-1571). More precious materials were entrusted to Cardinal de Granvelle (1517-1586) to procure from Flanders later that year. Cited in Garcia-Frías Checa, p.112.
[50] Garcia-Frías Checa, p.120.
[51] Wivel, Matthias, *Titian: Love, Desire, Death*, Exhib. cat., The National Gallery, (London, 2020). p.15

The allegorical meaning of the story was also being explored in early sixteenth-century 'Ovidios moralizados', translations with a commentary that expounded the various moral attributes of the protagonists. The theme of Perseus, for example, had come to be seen as an allegory of the defence of the Church from the 'monster' that was the Lutheran heresy. An association that had been exploited in paintings by Perino del Vaga in the decoration of the Farnese apartments at Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome. Becerra may even have conceived the idea for *The Apotheosis of Perseus* in the central roundel in response to Perino's figure in the Hall of Perseus [Figs. 30 and 31][52].

Turning to the frescoes themselves, the first thing to note is how Becerra laid out the images. At the centre is a roundel, with four large rectangular panels on each side and four oval panels set in square frames at each corner. Each image is surrounded by stucco mouldings, with further stucco and painted grotesques used to decorate the spaces between the images. While the use of stucco framing for the ceiling images was not new, Becerra's arrangement of the panels followed closely the layout adopted by Daniele da Volterra in the della Rovere Chapel [Fig. 32]. The poor state of conservation of the della Rovere mouldings make it impossible to tell whether Becerra imitated more than the basic layout of the ceiling at El Pardo. However, he could easily have looked elsewhere in Rome for inspiration, as Becerra's painted grotesques show a knowledge of the decoration of the Criptoportico from the *Domus Aurea* and many of the fine stuccowork details echo the decoration the 'all'antica' style of the Vatican Loggia. Carmen García-

[52] Garcia-Frías Checa, p.119.

Frías Checa has referred to Becerra's 'knowledge of a fairly vast archaeological culture', which he may have gained either from direct observation of antique buildings or from drawings by artists such as Giovanni da Udine (1487-1564) [53]. Whatever the source, Becerra's ability to transmit Roman models to his Spanish workshop would most likely have required the production of numerous drawings capturing and translating this 'archaeological' treasury.

Of all the extant drawings relating to the El Pardo commission the most celebrated is preparatory drawing of the figures of *Mercury and Minerva* for the scene of *Perseus receiving the gifts of Mercury and Minerva* [Figs. 33 and 34]. This sheet, from the collection of the Louvre, displays a high level of finish, giving it the quality of a presentation drawing. Interestingly, Becerra chose to use a fine-quality laid paper for this sheet which enhanced the visual effects of the black chalk. The clear outlines used for Mercury's body show Becerra's concern for anatomical correctness, while the use of rubbed chalk marks help him to articulate his muscular torso. Mark MacDonald has suggested that these techniques may have been learned not only from Michelangelo's drawings but also those of Giulio Clovio, with whom he was on good terms in Rome[54]. While the El Pardo fresco departs in very few respects from the preparatory drawing, Becerra's skill on display in the drawing appears to eclipse the final work. The drawing must also have had a significant impact at the time of its production and in the years that followed, as Pacheco felt compelled to relay a story concerning Becerra showing the drawing to Philip II[55].

[53] Garcia-Frías Checa, p.127.
[54] MacDonald, p.72.
[55] Palomino, p.22.

Other drawings for this scene can be found in the collection of the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial. These are an almost complete cartoon for the figure of Perseus and three sections of the cartoon showing Minerva's head and the middle section of Mercury's body [Figs. 35 and 36]. While fragmentary and lacking the finish of the Louvre sheet, these working cartoons provide further evidence of Becerra's hand at every stage of the design and execution of the fresco process.

A cartoon also exists for the image of *The Beheading of Medusa* [Figs. 37 and 38]. Although certain peripheral elements have been lost, this cartoon captures the action of the scene as Perseus swoops down upon an unsuspecting Medusa. In this cartoon Becerra's concern for the accurate rendering of the human body can be seen. Manuel Aras has suggested that the figure of Medusa, hands raised above her head, may have been inspired by an illustration from Charles Estienne's (1504-1564) *De Disectione* (1545), in turn derived from a print representing Venus and Cupid engraved by Jacopo Caraglio (1500-1565) after Perino in the series of the *Loves of the Gods* [Fig. 39][56]. Even when working at scale, Becerra's subtle use of the black chalk parallel lines to suggest the gentle contouring of his figures, gives his figures a monumentality that again appears to be greater in his drawing than in the completed fresco. However, this judgement should not detract from the quality of his painting, which is in full evidence, for example, in the splendid grisaille rendering of the soldiers who have been petrified by the Gorgon's gaze:

[56] Arias Martínez, Manuel, Miscelánea sobre Gaspar Becerra, in *Boletín del Museo Nacional de Escultura Valladolid*, (Madrid, 2007). p.14

a group of figures taken from Michelangelo's last paintings of the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and the *Conversion of Saint Paul* in the Capella Paolina.

While today all that remains of the main decorative scheme is the ceiling, the original work saw the Perseus narrative continue thorough wall frescoes. In 1777 Antonio Ponz (1725-1792) described the poor condition of the wall paintings, including in his description the first mention of Andromeda within the Perseus narrative. While these wall paintings have been permanently lost, it is likely that one of the scenes would have been the *Freeing of Andromeda*, a view supported by the existence of a near life size cartoon, also in the collection at El Escorial [Fig. 40]. Some scholars doubt this sheet's attribution to Becerra, citing the use of a blue ground which is unlike Becerra's other cartoons for El Pardo[57]. However, the high level of finish in the black chalk drawing and the Andromeda's fleshy physiognomy would certainly appear in keeping with Becerra's style. The sheet's large dimensions would also suggest it was prepared for direct transfer to a wall decoration. The image itself, with Andromeda tied to a rock while Perseus turns a sea monster to stone with Medusa's severed head, suggests a clear knowledge of Titian's portrayal of the same subject, which had arrived in the Royal collection by 1557. A possible inspiration that can also be seen in Becerra's ceiling depiction of *Danae receiving the golden rain*, following the arrival in the Royal collection of Titian's version of the scene in 1554. These references to the Venetian artist's *poesie* would no doubt have met with the approval of Becerra's Royal patron.

[57] Espinós, A., *Felipe II, Un principe del Renacimiento*, exhibit. cat., (Madrid 1998). pp.379-380.

One final example of the repertoire of visual effects that Becerra deployed at El Pardo is the painted decoration of the door recesses, discovered during the 2001-2003 restoration campaign. These recesses contain the remains of painted panels displaying pastoral and hunting scenes surrounded by borders with a rich array of birds, small animals, and fauna [Figs. 41 and 42]. These highly naturalistic representations give the impression they were drawn from life, a distinct possibility given the rural setting of El Pardo that they were intended to complement. Becerra may have seen the more exotic birds in the aviary at the Alcázar in Madrid. He may also have had access to the illustrations and descriptions of birds in Konrad Gessner's (1516-1565) *Historiae Animalium*. The third book of this magnum opus, devoted to birdlife, was published in 1555[58]. However, the impact of the work of Giovanni da Udine must also be considered, whose unparalleled use of this form of decoration Becerra would have encountered in Rome, in particular the birds that da Udine painted on the pilasters of the Vatican Loggia. These recent discoveries at El Pardo throw further light of Becerra's practice of using ideas and images from his Roman lexicon to create essentially new works, adapted to the location and taste of the Spanish court. In this particular case, such carefully observed depictions of nature responded to a longstanding Spanish predilection for detail and finish, a taste reflecting the longstanding impact of Flemish models on the Iberian peninsula[59].

The decoration of the Torre de la Reina at El Pardo, although not a work that would have been widely viewed outside of the most senior court circles, remains a work that is critical to understanding both Becerra's mature style and his working method. From the

[58] Garcia-Frías Checa, pp.128-129.
[59] Locker, Jesse M., ed., *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance After Trent*, (New York, 2019). p.132.

conception of the Perseus narrative through to the expressive rendering of his ideas in preparatory drawings, working cartoons and the practice of buon fresco, Becerra was drawing on the experience he had gathered in Rome and repurposing it for this very Spanish setting. At Astorga he had already shown his facility for imbuing the human figure with a new monumentality, but in the drawings and frescoes of El Pardo, Becerra had even greater freedom to explore his talent for anatomical exactitude and the grace that can be found in nude studies such as those for Mercury and Andromeda. The El Pardo decorations also show the range of influences that Becerra was able to absorb in his art, from the ornithological depictions of da Udine to Titian's mythologies. Without needing to digress into debating the extent to which Becerra might be called a 'mannerist', what can be claimed by the sophisticated decoration of El Pardo is the introduction into the canon of Spanish art of a 'modern manner'. A form with essentially Roman roots, challenging the Hispano-Flemish tradition that had dominated the peninsula in Becerra's youth.

5. Becerra's assistants and the 'arca de modelos'

As has already been noted, at Astorga, Becerra required the services of a highly skilled workshop to turn his designs into the complex carved and decorated retable. Key among his assistants were the wood sculptors Pedro de Arbulo and Juan Fernández de Vallejo. They were joined by a team of stucco masons that included Miguel Martínez, Miguel de Ribas, and Baltasar del Torneo (d. 1579). While scant information exists regarding the lives of these masons, shortly before his death in 1568 Becerra petitioned that they should remain in Royal service after his death given the quality of their work at El Pardo and the Alcázar. Ribas was identified as the best of three to 'guide and correct the skilled labourers in the said art of stucco', suggesting an extended workshop with different layers of assistants. These three masons were clearly trusted by Becerra and may even enjoyed some autonomy under Becerra's guidance, as a number of skilled assistants continued to work at El Pardo during a leave of absence that Becerra took from the project in 1563.[60]

Unfortunately, the documentary evidence surrounding the El Pardo decorations provides no further information on the names involved. However, a letter from Becerra to the King's secretary provides the names of Gaspar de Hoyos (b. 1540) and Cosme Susarte. But the letter also states that neither should work on the El Pardo frescoes in Becerra's absence, suggesting he was heavily involved in the execution of the principal images. The unremarkable artist Jerónimo Vázquez (1521-1581) must also have worked at El Pardo as

[60] Garcia-Frías Checa, p 114.

on Becerra's death he was in possession of a number of Becerra's drawings. Carmen García-Frías Checa's examination of the El Pardo frescoes suggests that Becerra did indeed reserve the painting of the main scenes for himself, leaving his assistants to work on the grotesque motifs and the decoration of the door recesses[61].

Among other Spanish artists connected to Becerra's workshop was the artist's brother Juan Becerra, whom he entrusted in his will with the completion of the Descalzas altarpieces. Palomino records a number of artists as Becerra's students including Miguel Barroso (1538-1590), who went on to be appointed Painter to the King in 1589, following his work at El Escorial. Palomino also lists Teodosio Mingot (c.1551-1590) and Juan and Francisco Perola (active until 1600). The latter brothers, Palomino described as disciples of the art of Michelangelo, having studied both with Becerra and with Giovanni Battista Castello, known as Il Bergamasco (c.1509-1569)[62].

Martínez informs his readers that Becerra 'had many gifts of fortune and shared his knowledge most generously with his followers, who were numerous in both disciplines'[63]. However, one conclusion that can be drawn from this examination of Becerra's Iberian assistants is that his workshop did not produce an artist to equal his own skill or reputation. The most successful of this group was Barroso. An unusual design for vestments for El Escorial, in the collection of the British Museum, demonstrates both Barroso's skill at producing highly finished mixed media drawings and his concern for the drawing's use and survival [Fig. 43]. This drawing is one of a number that have been very

[61] Garcia-Frías Checa, p 127.
[62] Palomino, p.42.
[63] Martínez, p.143.

carefully pricked so as to accurately transfer the image onto the fabric and to ensure the sheet's preservation[64].

While Becerra may have benefited on his return from Italy in 1557 from the difficulty in attracting foreign artists of distinction to work for any length of time in Spain, with the settling of the Court in Madrid and the demand from nobles, prelates, and ambassadors for artists to decorate their residences, the lack of artists skilled in the technique of wall painting would soon become a problem for the works that Becerra was directing at El Pardo and in Segovia.

This problem was eventually resolved in September 1567 with the arrival in Spain of Romulo Cincinnato (1540-1597) and Patrizio Cascese (1544-1616), both recommended to the King by the Spanish Ambassador in Rome, Luis de Requesens (1528-1576). Cincinnato, a Florentine follower of Francesco Salviati, and Cascese (known in Spain as Cajes), an artist and architect from Arezzo, agreed to work in Spain on the decoration of the Royal residence at El Pardo and Segovia for an initial period of three years under the direction of Becerra[65].

Adding to their number was Giovanni Battista Castello, Il Bergamasco, who also entered into the King's service in September 1567. However, this Italian came on rather better terms, with an annual salary of 3000 reales and an independent mandate to work at El Escorial and a great many of the Royal residences in Castille. Following Becerra's death

[64] McDonald, p.74.
[65] Faietti, Mozzati, and Gallori, p.170.

on 23 January 1568 it was Il Bergamasco who was placed in charge of decorating all the Royal palaces, bringing with him, in May of that year, his own team of assistants to work alongside Cincinnato, Cascese and Becerra's masons.

While there remains some debate concerning the extent to which Il Bergamasco intervened in the decoration of the Torre de la Reina at El Pardo, the more general conclusion that can be drawn is that the Spanish Crown yet again turned to artists from the Italian peninsula[66]. Not only for the additional manpower required to meet the demands of their extensive building programme, but also to undertake much of the artistic direction of these projects. Although Il Bergamasco would die only a year after Becerra, the pattern was set for Philip's grandest project, the decoration of El Escorial. For this Philip would persuade Luca Cambiaso (1527-1585), Federico Zuccaro (c.1540-1609) and Pellegrino Tibaldi (1527-1596) to spend time in Spain leading the gargantuan decorative effort. The employment of these notable artists may appear to signal the total hegemony of Italian art within Spain, but, in reality, much of the workforce they assembled were local artists, including figures such as Miguel Barroso who had trained with Becerra. They were also called to work in a Spanish context with a Royal patron who had distinct tastes and concerns, provoking a more nuanced exchange of artistic ideas.

If Becerra's legacy was not to produce a cadre of artists capable of meeting all the needs of Spanish patrons, one important channel for the transmission of his artistic vision was the vast number of drawings that he had produced during his career. These included

[66] Garcia-Frías Checa, pp.116-118.

drawings requested by the King soon after Becerra's death so that work could resume on unfinished projects, involving several rooms at the Alcázar, four large paintings for the lower church of the Bosque de Segovia, and liturgical ornaments and a small cloister at El Escorial. Becerra's will and that of his wife, who died in 1569, also mention an 'arca de modelos'. A chest of drawings that Paula Velázquez's will states has 'all the models that her husband brought from Italy'[67]. This tantalising collection of 'modelos' must have included the various drawings of the *Last Judgement* that survive today. Becerra's drawings were not only needed to complete unfinished commissions, they were also highly valued by artists who would use them in creating new works, making their way into the collections of sculptors such as Pompeo Leoni (1533-1608)[68].

Becerra's ideas would also be continued in his three-dimensional models. Although there are none surviving, it has already been noted that Palomino possessed a highly accurate model of a leg, which he claimed was made by Becerra. Daphne Barbour has highlighted the impact on these models not only on Becerra's assistants, such as Pedro de Arbulo, but also on his competitors such as the sculptor Juan de Juni who owed Becerra 'his appreciation for the valuable role that models could play in the design process'[69].

[67] Arias Martínez, Manuel, Gaspar Becerra, Escultor O Tracista. La documentación testamentaria de su viuda, Paula Veláquez, in *Archivo Español de Arte*, Vol. LXXI, no. 281-281, (Madrid, 1998). p.277.
[68] Faietti, Mozzati, and Gallori, p.96.
[69] Dickerson and McDonald, p.119.

6. Conclusions

Becerra's journey in Italy and its impact on his subsequent production in Spain was by no means unique. Many artists had followed this path, not least of which was Alonso Berruguete, who had been in contact with Michelangelo in the early decades of the sixteenth century and had absorbed into his art the manner of artists such as Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1547) and Rosso Fiorentino (1495-1540)[70]. Berruguete was also well aware of the Italian concept of disegno, a conclusion that can be drawn from his prolific graphic output and the models he used in his studio practice[71].

For Becerra, the point of departure from Berruguete and his fellow Spaniards was the decision not to return home. Choosing to spend over half of his active career in Italy, working on commissions mainly for Italian patrons. This inevitably gave Becerra an extended exposure to the work of Michelangelo, moving beyond what Berruguete had learnt in Florence before his return to Spain in 1517. Most notably this can be seen in his preoccupation with the human figure, bringing to his work the fullest expression of Michelangelo's sculptural ideals, with a style that Benito Navarrete Prieto has recently characterised as embracing 'a new grace and fullness', echoing the judgements of the art theorists of the past[72].

[70] Ames-Lewis & Joannides, p.212.
[71] Dickerson and McDonald, p.64.
[72] Navarrete Prieto, Benito, *I segni nel tempo : dibujos españoles de los Uffizi*, Exhibit. cat., Galleria degli Uffizi, (Florence, 2016). p.50.

The opportunity to produce copies of the *Last Judgement* and Michelangelo's many presentation drawings was critical to Becerra's formation. However, as important, was his exposure to a group of artists, based in Rome, who were formulating their own creative responses to the works of Michelangelo and Raphael. In the workshops of Giorgio Vasari and Daniele da Volterra he saw how 'imitation' was not slavish copying, but using their former master's art through references, appropriations, and transformations. Becerra would also see that drawing was at the heart of this process, both as a means to record and explore the work of others and as the operative tool for realising artistic ideas and managing workshop production.

Returning to Spain in 1557 it was, as Mark McDonald writes, 'Becerra's lifelong commitment to drawing [that] distinguishes him from Spanish contemporaries'[73]. With his 'arca de modelos' and a formidable skill in the graphic arts Becerra was able to translate much of what he had encountered into new forms that met the needs of Spanish ecclesiastical and Royal patrons. At Astorga he created a retable of exemplary narrative clarity, bringing a new monumentality and pathos to an artform that remained central to Spanish religious and artistic identity. At El Pardo, Becerra's highly finished preparatory drawings and cartoons remain a testament both to his workshop practice and to the range of artists and sources that had contributed to the development of his artistic personality. In producing a work so indebted to artists such as Perino del Vaga and Daniele da Volterra he also contributed to the growing preference in Spain for Italian models over the

[73] McDonald, p.71.

Hispano-Flemish art of the past[74]. A taste that would reach its zenith in the artists that would be called upon to decorate El Escorial.

Drawing was critical to Becerra's legacy in the decades following his death. Martínez wrote in his treatise on drawing that in both symmetry and anatomy Becerra 'exceeded all his contemporaries, and in Spain he established the norm in both these parts, which are so crucial to these professions that without them it is not possible to produce anything of quality'[75]. Vincente Carducho, the influential seventeenth-century painter and art theorist, wrote in his treatise *Diágolos de la Pintura* (1633) that Becerra's drawings were "so unduly based on art and science, and so perfect in every way that they made me feel sorry about the present time, for there is scarcely anyone who wishes to look at them, let alone imitate them'[76]. In this short sentence Carducho summed up both the quality of Becerra's graphic output and the decline in interest that had occurred in the seventy-five years that had passed since Becerra's death.

Becerra's fall from favour might be explained simply as a response to changing tastes, as both the demand for artforms such as wall painting declined and new artists rose to prominence, ushering in new artistic idioms[77]. However, putting this lament aside, what remains clear from Carducho's words is that Becerra's drawings were well known, available for artists to study, and central to the critical appreciation of Becerra's art.

[74] Navarrete Prieto, p.47.
[75] Martínez, p.143.
[76] Carducho, Vicente, *Diágolos de la Pintura, su difensa, origen, escencia, definición,modos y diferencia*s, ed. F. Calvo Serraller, (Madrid 1979). p.179.
[77] McDonald, p.75.

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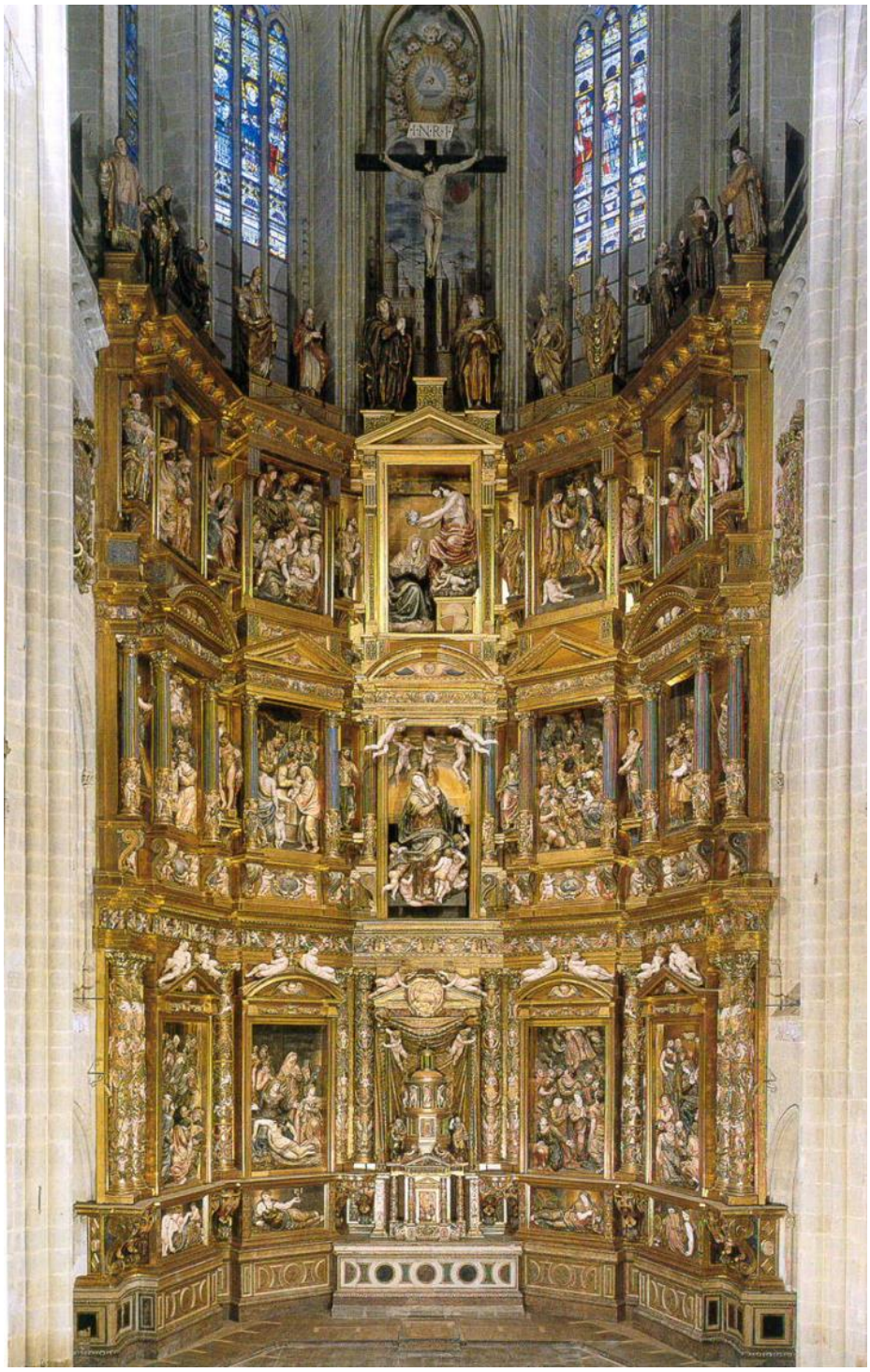

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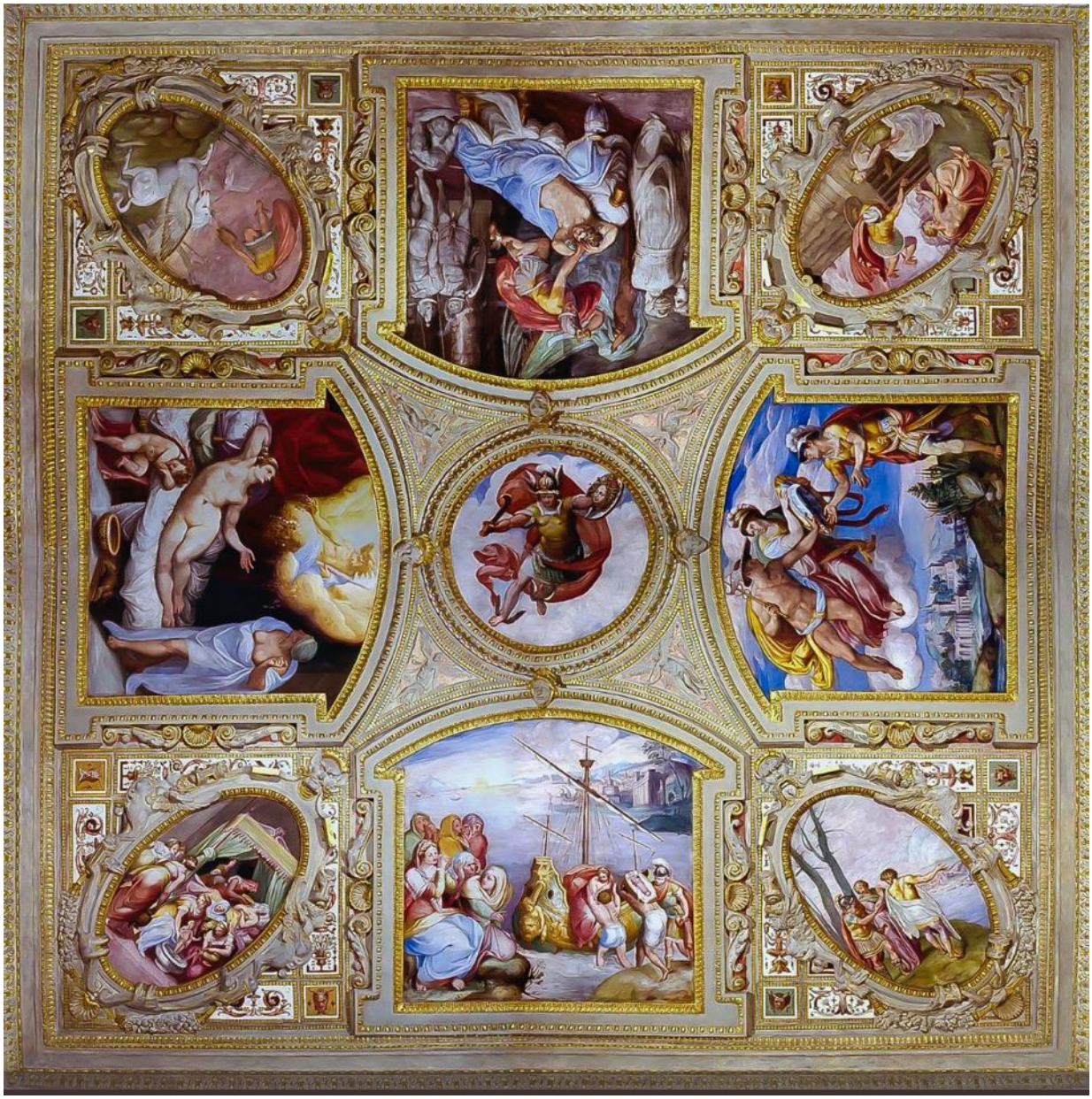

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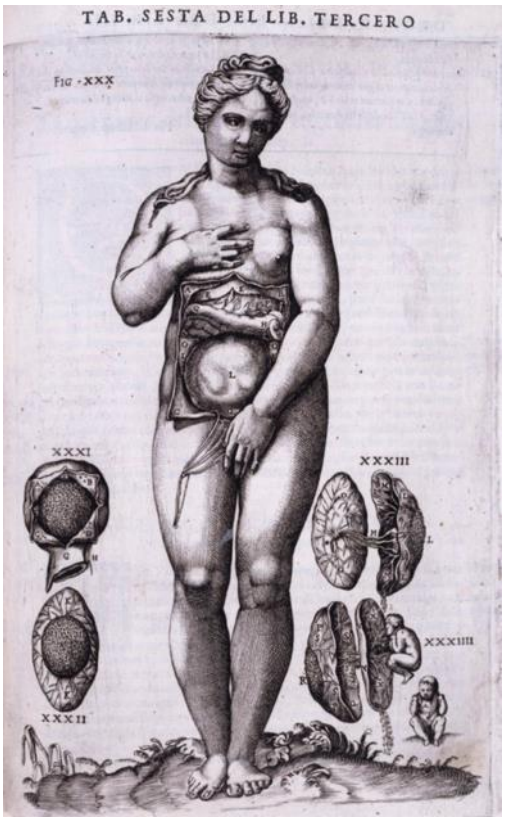

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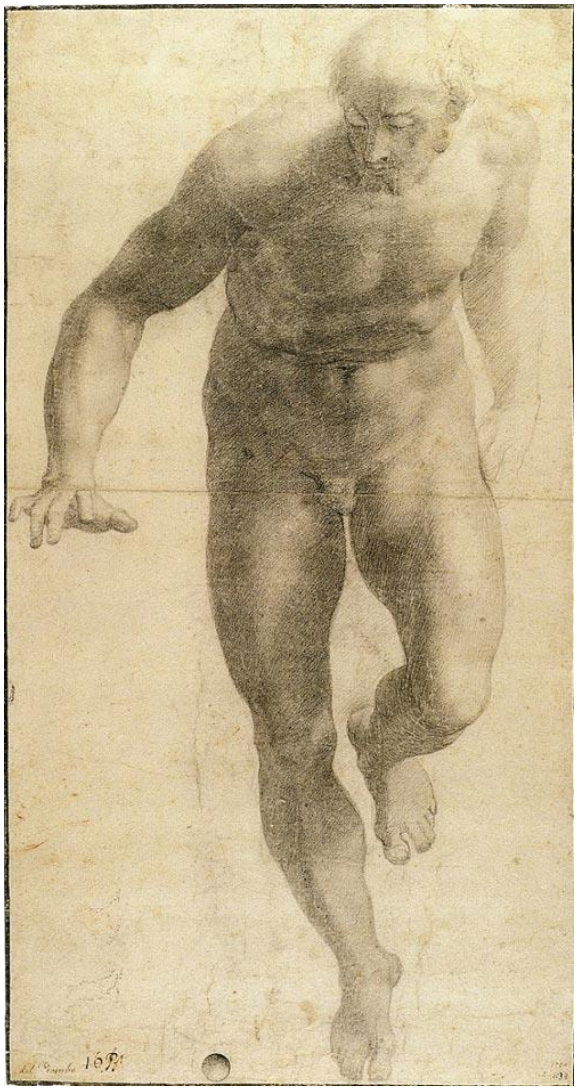

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Pen and ink, 194cm x 96cm.

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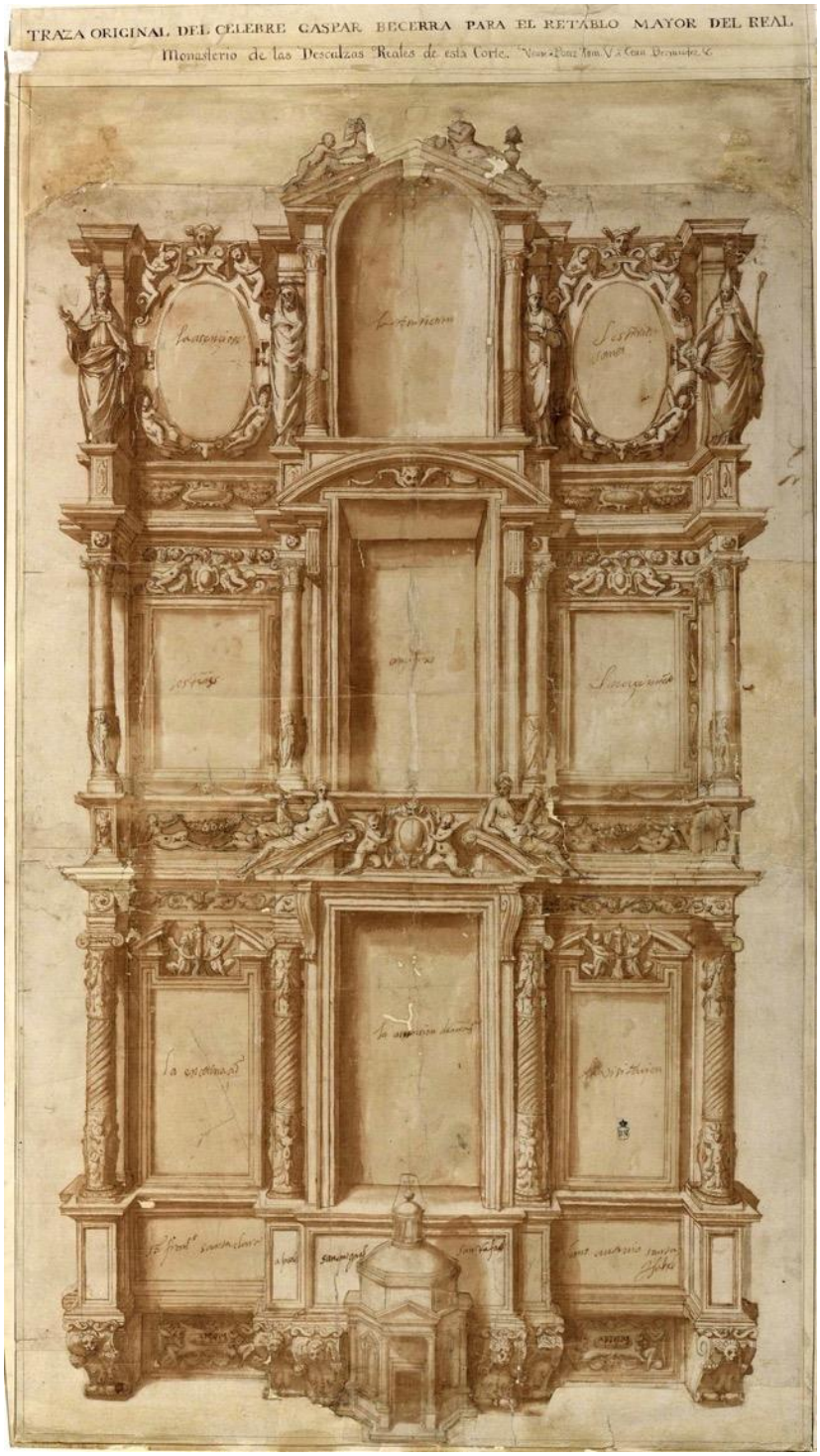

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Carved wood, with polychromed and gilded decoration.

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Pietà, 1553.

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Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

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Carved wood, with polychromed and gilded decoration.

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Engraving, 21.2cm x 14.1cm.

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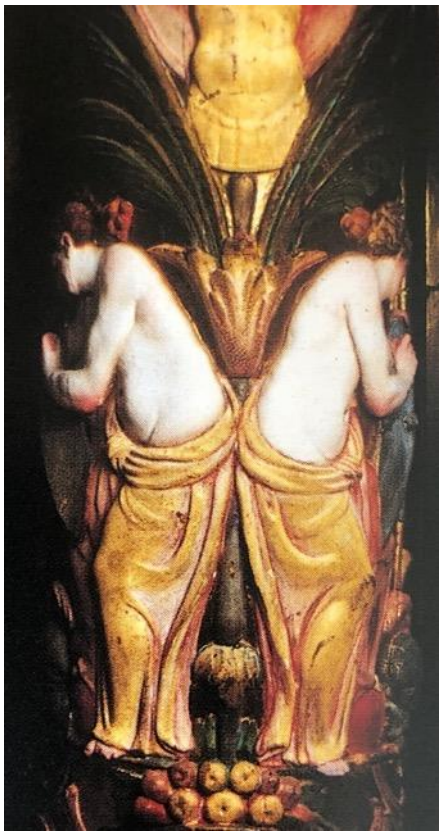

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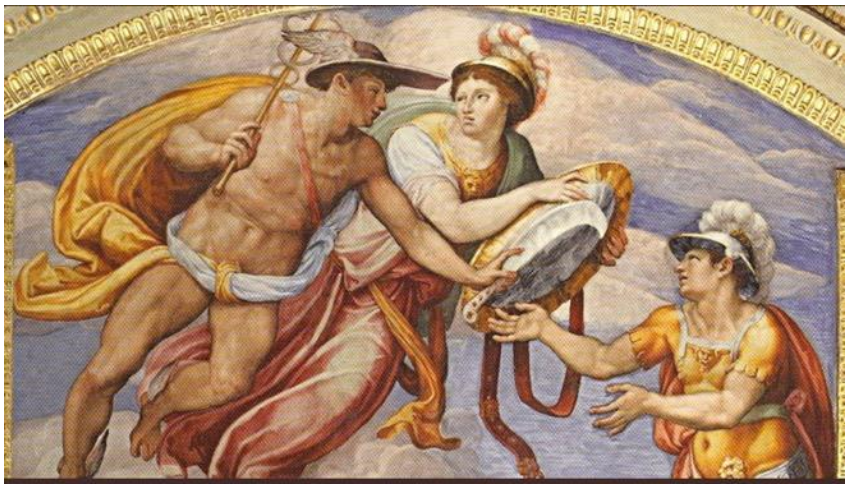

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Figure 35:
GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

Cartoon of *Perseus* for the ceiling decoration of the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Black chalk, 84.6cm x 53.4cm.

Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial
(inv. D2a).

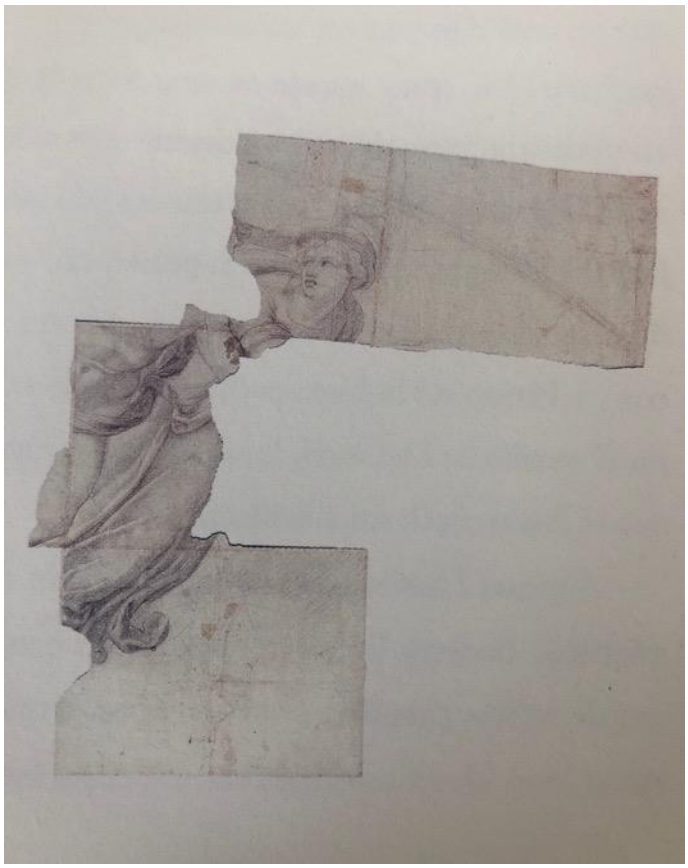

Figure 36:
GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

Cartoon of *Mercury and Minerva* for the fresco *Perseus receiving the gifts of Mercury and Minerva,* of the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Black chalk, 123cm x 120cm.

Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial (inv. D2b).

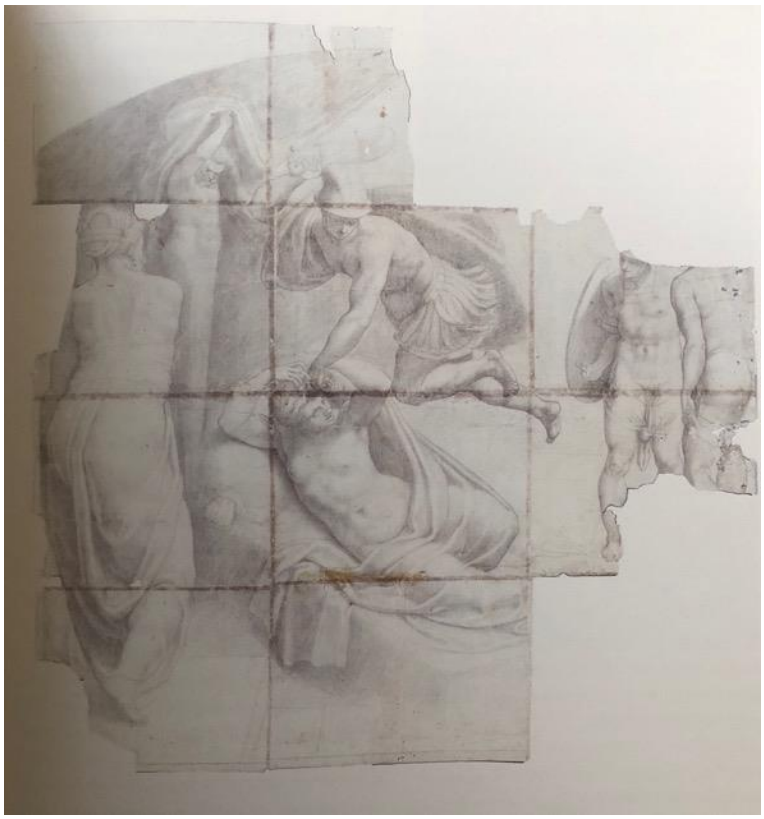

Figure 37:

GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

Cartoon of *The Beheading of the Medusa* for the ceiling decoration of the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Black chalk, 160cm x 160cm.

Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial (inv. D1).

Figure 38:
GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

The Beheading of the Medusa from the ceiling decoration of the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Fresco with carved and gilded stucco.

Figure 39:
CHARLES ESTIENNE, after JACAPO CARAGLIO, after PERINO DEL VAGA

Anatomical Study after *Venus and Cupid* from the *Loves of the Gods*, printed in *De Dissectione partium corporis humani*, c.1545.

Woodcut, 35.9cm x 23.4cm.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 42.138).

Figure 40:
GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

Cartoon of the *Freeing of Andromeda* for the lost wall decoration of the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Black chalk and white heightening on blue laid paper, 159cm x 162.5cm.

Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial (inv. D7).

Figure 41:
GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

Left panel of the South door recess, featuring *A pastoral scene with a youth playing a gaita surrounded by exotic birds and animal*s, in the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Fresco with carved and gilded stucco.

Figure 42:
GASPAR BECERRA and workshop

Right panel of the East door recess, featuring *A pastoral scene with a youth playing a viol surrounded by exotic birds and animal*s, in the Torre de la Reina, Palacio Real de El Pardo, Madrid, 1563-1568.

Fresco with carved and gilded stucco.

Figure 43:
MIGUEL BARROSO

Christ distributing bread to his disciples after his resurrection, c.1587-1590.

Pen, brown ink, brown wash, white heightening over black chalk, pricked for transfer, 17cm x 27cm.

British Museum, London (inv. 2011,7109.1)