Bartolommeo shows masterpieces in the making

FRA BARTOLOMMEO
Master Draughtsman of the High Renaissance
Museum of Fine Arts
Jan. 15–April 12

By Leslie A. Barnett

Bartolommeo — one of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, right? No, but that's more to be if they ever add a fifth to their clan. His drawings have escaped the public's eye for too long, but Fra Bartolommeo: Master Draughtsman of the High Renaissance, now running at Museum of Fine Arts, has remedied the situation.

The show is an American tour premiere documenting the development of Fra Bartolommeo's drawing style. The selections in the exhibit were taken for preservation from albums containing over 500 of his chalk drawings. The albums were originally assembled in 1729 by Nicolo Gabburi. All of the drawings now belong to the Museum Boughtan van Beuningen in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Fra Bartolommeo (1472-1517), born Baccio della Porta, is one of four artists responsible for the formulation of High Renaissance style. Though not as well-known as his peers: Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael, Fra Bartolommeo and his work are just as worthy of renown.

The exhibit is organized around Bartolommeo's painting projects. In preparation for a project, Bartolommeo would work on a series of chalk studies of his subject. As he developed a project, Bartolommeo made visible changes. Some of these changes can be seen from one drawing to the next, in a series, while others can be seen within a particular sketch.

Alongside the drawing studies, a photographic reproduction of the painting project is provided. Most of Bartolommeo's painting projects are large wall frescoes and altar-pieces. The quantity and intensity of the drawing studies only begin to reveal the arduous process involved in creating the actual paintings.

Bartolommeo's personality is revealed in his sketches rather than his wall frescoes. Some of his better finished artworks in themselves others are obvious scrapwork in which he uses every inch of the paper to do small tests. His ideas are done in black, white, and red chalk on grey, white, or light brown paper. By changing the amount of black chalk, Bartolommeo uses the least amount of chalk for faces, which allows them to maintain their softness. Only subtle shading is required of his well-trained hand for accurate rendering of musculature and to articulate the folds in fabric, where he uses the greatest amount of black chalk.

The exhibit of Fra Bartolommeo's work includes a few of his pen and ink landscape drawings. He uses a firm but delicate line, achieving great detail in his own and hillside architecture. Bartolommeo is exposed to us, not only as a master Renaissance artist, but as a man with a sensitive eye. His drawings are passionate and alive; his talent and sensitivity will be appreciated by even the most unlikely museum-goer.

These illustrations show Fra Bartolommeo's progression from original sketch to final painting. Modello for Ferry Carondelet Altar, Album M 181 (left) and The Ferry Carondelet Altar, Cathedral Besancon.

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