



The Figure Studies of Pietro Bernardi

• BERT W. MEIJER •

In 1953 the Rijksmuseum acquired a group of twenty-nine sheets of figure studies, some with drawings on both sides, that is both interesting and exceptional. In the main they were executed in black chalk, heightened with white chalk, on bluish-green, bluish-grey or coarse-textured light brown paper, now partly discoloured. Licisco Magagnato, the former director of the Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona and an expert on the local school of painting, identified the drawings as work by early seventeenth-century artists from and active in Verona. At that time they were virtually unknown as draughtsmen.¹ Since then, more has become known about these drawings and their authors. In what follows I will summarize the state of affairs and add some new data and observations.

The sheets were briefly mentioned as work by the Veronese school for the first time in the catalogue of seventeenth-century Italian drawings in the Rijksmuseum compiled by Lineke Frerichs and published in 1973.² Three authors of drawings in the group were subsequently identified in the catalogue of the 1985 exhibition of Venetian drawings in Dutch public collections in Venice and Florence, and this meant that some of the sheets could be linked as preliminary studies

Detail of fig 8.

to paintings by these artists, all of whom had indeed been active in Verona.

At least eight sheets, some drawn on both recto and verso, proved to be by Pasquale Ottino (1578-1630).³ Until a few years ago he was much less well-known as a draughtsman than his contemporaries Marcantonio Bassetti (1586-1630) and Alessandro Turchi (1578-1649). These three protagonists of painting in Verona in the early part of the seventeenth century all went to Rome, where they were influenced by Caravaggism and by less naturalistic, more classicist developments.

The still almost unknown Dionisio Guerri († c. 1630) is represented in the Amsterdam group by a strikingly vibrant study. This is linked to his only documented and known public work, the huge canvas of the *Communion of St Augustine*, painted for the church of Sant'Eufemia (now in the Museo di Castelvecchio) or to one of the three other paintings of episodes from the life of the saint that were in the church until the early part of the twentieth century but are now lost or dispersed. These, too, were by this Veronese painter, who was inspired by his teacher Domenico Fetti, active in nearby Mantua.⁴

Our knowledge of the life and oeuvre of Pietro Bernardi, the third



Fig. 1
PIETRO BERNARDI,
Angel Annunciate,
c. 1620.
Black and white
chalk on coloured
paper, 290 x 191 mm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. no.
RP-T-1953-433, recto).

Fig. 2
PIETRO BERNARDI,
Angel Annunciate,
Church of San Fermo,
Verona.

artist whose work has been identified in the group of drawings in Amsterdam, is likewise scant, but has grown somewhat in recent years. There is a small nucleus of signed paintings that has made it possible to add a number of other canvases to his oeuvre.⁵ This proves beyond doubt that Bernardi also studied Caravaggio and Italian Caravaggisti in Rome in the 1620s and that their work had probably been even more fundamentally important to him than to the trio referred to above.

The *Annunciation* above the archway leading to the chapel of the Madonna in the church of San Fermo in Verona belongs to the group of this artist's acknowledged works. Accord-



ing to Dal Pozzo it was painted in 1617.⁶ The Rijksprentenkabinet has a detailed preliminary study of the angel annunciate with arms crossed over the chest (figs. 1 and 2). The simple outlines and the quite sharp, shallow folds indicated predominantly in white with alternating light and dark passages between them, executed with subtle parallel hatching applied horizontally, diagonally and vertically, are characteristic of Bernardi's style. In the preliminary study we find at most an initial indication of the strong Caravaggesque chiaroscuro contrasts that are such a striking feature of the painted *Annunciation*. The positions of the head and the left leg are also not precisely the same as those in the painting.⁷

This is not the only sheet credited to Bernardi in the Amsterdam group of drawings. Once the drawing had been linked to the *Annunciation* in the church of San Fermo in Verona, it was also possible to attribute a second drawing of an angel to him on the grounds of the very similar style. This angel sits in the clouds, looks upward and is shown with wings and hands folded; there is a much smaller, light, somewhat nervous sketch for the same figure in the lower left corner.⁸ The differences between this and the *Angel Annunciate* are such that they are undoubtedly studies for two different paintings.

There is at least one other sheet in the group of figure studies in Amsterdam by Bernardi that can be linked to one of his signed paintings. On one side is a study of the wrinkled face of an elderly woman looking up, in profile, built up in pronounced relief (fig. 3). She is typified with the rather rough, common realism which – along with a more idealizing manner – is one of the characteristic elements of Bernardi's Caravaggesque-inspired style. It is formed here by a clear, yet partly repeated and corrected outline and a subtle play of parallel hatching lines in black and white chalk like those we encountered in the sheet with the angel. The drawing is undoubtedly the preliminary study for the head of the woman on the left in the painting of *San Carlo Borromeo Intervening for the Plague Victims*, signed by Bernardi and dated 1615 or 1616, which is in and was painted for the church of San Carlo in Verona (fig. 4). It refers to the 'Plague of San Carlo', the severe epidemic of 1575-76, when the Milanese cardinal Carlo Borromeo (1538-84) went to extraordinary lengths to help the victims. Together with its pendant, *San Carlo Borromeo Distributing Alms to the Poor* (fig. 6), it was painted a few years after his canonization in 1610. As she is in the drawing, the woman is depicted in the painting with her mouth open, looking with amazement and awe at the miraculous cure or halting of the epidemic which is announced.⁹ The degree of attention the artist devoted to capturing this relatively minor detail on paper makes it likely that he made other studies as part of the creative process that led to the painting.

On the other side of the same sheet is a drawing of a young lute player (fig. 5). This would seem to confirm Dal Pozzo's references to musical compositions by Francesco Bernardi, whose activities and works, it has been established in the recent art historiography, the Veronese historian confused

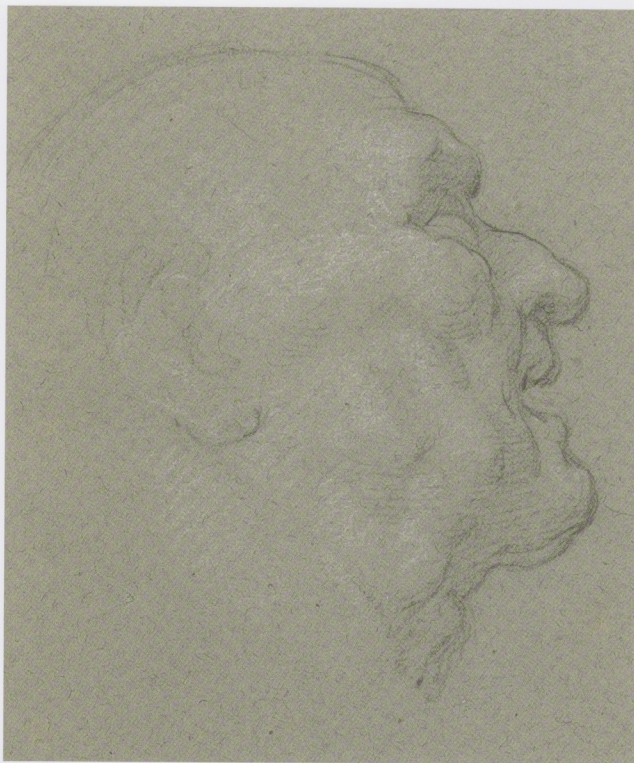


Fig. 3
PIETRO BERNARDI,
Woman Looking Up,
c. 1620. Black and
white chalk on
coloured paper,

197 x 275 mm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. no.
RP-T-1953-429, verso).

Fig. 4
PIETRO BERNARDI,
*San Carlo Borromeo
Intervening for the
Plague Victims*. Church
of San Carlo, Verona.





with and erroneously distinguished from those of Pietro. This confusion even extended to signed works by Pietro.¹⁰ A head of a young man with a very similar physiognomy can be seen on the far right in the middle ground of Bernardi's second painting in the church of San Carlo, *San Carlo Borromeo Distributing Alms* (fig. 6).¹¹

In my opinion there are at least eight – and possibly even more – other sheets of figures in the group in Amsterdam that are likewise attributable to Bernardi. These (all drawn vertically unless stated otherwise) are a young mother with a baby in her arms;¹² a boy depicted half length on clouds (in horizontal format), undoubtedly intended as an angel, with a drapery study for a seated figure on the other side of the sheet;¹³ a boy seated on a cloud, probably also intended as an angel for a now unknown painting (fig. 7);¹⁴ a seated king turned to the left;¹⁵ a standing

Fig. 5
PIETRO BERNARDI,
Young Lute Player,
c. 1620.
Black and white chalk
on coloured paper,
197 x 275 mm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. no.
RP-T-1953-429, recto).

Fig. 6
PIETRO BERNARDI,
*San Carlo Borromeo
Distributing Alms
to the Poor*.
Church of San Carlo,
Verona.

Fig. 7
PIETRO BERNARDI,
Study for an Angel,
c. 1620.
Black and white chalk
on coloured paper,
290 x 197 mm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. no.
RP-T-1953-422).





soldier with lance and shield, and on the verso a figure of a man wrapped in a long robe with a stick in his left hand striding to the right and a much smaller, rather nervous study for the same figure, analogous to the combination of two studies for the figure of an angel on one side of a sheet mentioned above;¹⁶ a study of a young man that concentrates chiefly on the dress;¹⁷ a study of the right side of a figure with arm and hand;¹⁸ an almost full frontal study for the portrait of a woman, three-quarter length, focusing on the clothes and the position and pose of the hands, with a half-length figure of Christ showing his wounds drawn widthwise on the back (figs. 8 and 9).¹⁹ The drawings, which all have several characteristics in common with the studies referred to above, cannot be linked to one of the few known paintings by Bernardi. However, almost all of them seem to have been created as preliminary studies for details of religious compositions and portraits.²⁰

By virtue of the almost identical colours and measurements of the paper, the use of the same drawing materials, the similar style and the same type of drawing, with very minor differences, it has recently been established that five sheets of figure studies, two of which have drawings on both sides and all of which belong to the Fondazione Giorgio Cini collection in Venice, are likewise by Bernardi.²¹ They may have been part of the same sketchbook or the same ream of paper as Bernardi's sheets in Amsterdam.²² As far as we know, most of the paper used in Verona in the early seventeenth century was bought from paper mills and producers on the Riviera di Salò, in the valley of Toscolano Maderno close to Lake Garda. These paper manufacturers also supplied Venice and flourished until the plague struck in 1630. There has so far been little if any research into the paper as part of the study of drawings by Veronese and Venetian artists in this period. Little is

known about the nature and structure of the paper and the watermarks used in Verona.²³

The group of drawings in the Fondazione Cini includes a *Seated, Bearded Man Writing* looking up, possibly an evangelist or the priest Zacharias who, temporarily struck dumb, writes down the name of his son, John the Baptist; on the same sheet is a study of a right foot.²⁴ The light and the shape of the folds of the garment, a simple, relatively dark outline on the dark side of the leg and a far lighter, single outline on the lighter side, the manner of applying highlights with a long, fairly broad, rather straight line and with smaller blots are among the elements that this figure and the two drawings of angels (fig. 1) in Amsterdam have in common. These elements indicate that we are dealing with one and the same artist. A head of a man with a short beard, comparable in typological and formal respects, also appears among the apostles on the right in the background in Bernardi's altarpiece, the *Ascension of the Virgin*, in the parish church of Scardevara near Verona.²⁵

The face of the man in *Bearded Man with Right Hand Raised and the Left Leaning on the Shoulder of a Fat Man* has the same rather coarse character as the previous figure.²⁶ The woman on a sheet of a *Woman Stepping Forward with a Raised Right Arm* on the recto and a *Standing Man with Raised Right Arm and Stick (?) in the Left Hand*²⁷ on the verso is a close companion to the *Lute Player* in Amsterdam. The recto and verso were undoubtedly drawn by the same hand – that is to say by Bernardi. A *Standing Man in Profile with Arms Spread*²⁸ and a two-sided sheet of a *Girl (?) with Raised Arm Seen from Behind* on the recto and a *Study of the Clothes and Left Arm of a Figure*²⁹ on the verso are also the work of one artist. Less heightening in white has been applied here and the fabrics are somewhat different, falling more smoothly than in previously mentioned drawings.

Fig. 8
PIETRO BERNARDI,
*Study for the Portrait
of a Woman*, c. 1620.
Black and white chalk
on coloured paper,
285 x 190 mm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. no.
RP-T-1953-432, recto).





Fig. 9
PIETRO BERNARDI,
*Christ Showing his
Wounds*, c. 1620.
Black and white chalk
on coloured paper,
285 x 190 mm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. no.
RP-T-1953-432, verso).

However we also see relatively flat clothes like these in paintings by Bernardi, among them the *Annunciation to the Virgin* of 1617 in San Fermo and the figure of Christ in *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (Verona, church of Sant'Anastasia) of 1623.³⁰ In these three figures, outlines and parallel hatching lines create forms and shadow patterns that are also very similar to those in the *Head of a Woman* and the *Lute Player* in the Rijksprentenkabinet and to the *Seated Man Writing* in the Fondazione Cini collection. Even though these three studies may appear a little different at first glance, they are obviously the work of Bernardi.

A number of sheets of this type, executed with the same drawing materials and recently sold in Paris, have been identified as the artist's work.³¹ With only the small photographs of the rectos in the sale catalogues to go on, and given the lack of illustrations of the other sides, it is

not possible to endorse the attribution for all of these studies without further scrutiny, although the majority of the drawings illustrated may very well be the work of Bernardi.

For the time being, these figure studies are the sum of the known drawings by this artist. This gives rise to the question as to whether it is coincidence that we know only of figure studies by Bernardi and that there are no known sketches or finished drawings of and for completed compositions of the kind made by his Veronese contemporaries Turchi, Bassetti and Ottino. As yet there is no conclusive answer to be had, nor to the question as to why so few paintings by Bernardi have been discovered. The explanation for the modest number of paintings may be that the artist died quite young and probably did not have much time or opportunity to build up an extensive oeuvre. We know of no documentation about him dating from after 1623.³² On

the other hand a considerable number of the drawings discussed above would seem to indicate that Bernardi also drew preliminary studies for other paintings, now unknown.

From the painted work we know of, he comes across as an artist who made a personal contribution to Italian Caravaggism and created an atmosphere all his own through powerful chiaroscuro effects in which solid, sometimes rather rough-looking figures perform and act with a directly appealing impact but without strong, dramatic expressiveness. The same character distinguishes the figures drawn by Bernardi, giving him an individual place among his contemporaries who painted and drew in Verona. That does not alter the fact that, as the drawings in Amsterdam reveal, there is a clear similarity between his figure studies and those of Pasquale Ottino. It has therefore recently been suggested, rightly, that

Bernardi probably spent some time in Ottino's workshop during his years of professional education.³³

The group of Veronese figure studies is at the same time typical and exceptional. After all, as was usual in Verona, the drawings confirm that these Veronese authors had a certain degree of autonomy from artistic developments taking place in the capital of the Venetian Republic. This autonomy is not just a question of style; it also manifests itself in the fact that, aside from those in the oeuvre of older masters like Palma il Giovane and Domenico Tintoretto, figure studies in chalk by artists working in Venice itself occur infrequently in the first three decades of the seventeenth century, or at least information about them has so far proved remarkably rare.³⁴ The future may tell us whether that reflects the original situation or whether its cause lies in the loss of a large number of such drawings.

NOTES

* I am greatly indebted to Janna Israel, Jessica Ruse (both Casva) and Gregory Mott (The Image Collection) in the National Gallery in Washington, where this contribution was conceived, for their assistance and cooperation, and also to Laura Meijer, Francesca Rossi and Marijn Schapelhouman.

- 1 Indicative of the paucity of the knowledge then, particularly of the drawn work by the artists discussed here, is the fact that few if any other drawings by Pasquale Ottino were published at that time, with the exception of one sheet discussed by E. Tietze-Conrat ('Giovanni Bologna's Bronzes as Painter's Cribbs,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21, January-February 1947, pp. 32-34, figs. 1, 2, 4). The identification of the other artists' drawing styles, too, is a fairly recent occurrence.
- 2 Inv. nos. RP-T-1953-411 to 438. Provenance: De Beer, London. L. Frerichs, *Italiaanse tekeningen 1. de 17e eeuw. Rijksprentenkabinet/Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 1973, p. 46, nos. 212-40 (Anonymous, Veronese, c. 1620).
- 3 These are nos. RP-T-1953-413 to 418, 435 and 436, partly identified as such by Britte Ginsberg in her thesis written under the

guidance of B. Aikema. See B. Aikema, B. W. Meijer, *Disegni veneti di collezioni olandesi* (cat. Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini; Florence, Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut) Vicenza 1985, pp. 75-76; H. Sueur, 'Pasquale Ottino Dessinateur' *Verona Illustrata* 5, 1992, pp. 53-54, note 2 (where, among other things, it is mentioned that Marinelli identified no. 436 verso as a study for the *Massacre of the Innocents* in Verona, Santo Stefano (1619) and the author herself adds 426 recto as a work by Ottino); S. Marinelli in H. Sueur, *Le Dessin à Vérone aux xv^e et xvii^e siècles* (cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des dessins), Paris 1993, p. 21, figs. 3-5; S. Marinelli in *Museo di Castelvecchio Disegni* (cat. Verona, Museo di Castelvecchio) Milan 1999, pp. 16, 17, 23, note 35, correctly indicates that nos. RP-T-1953-426, 428, 431 and 432 are by Ottino; but no. 409 does not exist. For Ottino (c. 1615), Turchi (from 1614 to the end of his life) and Bassetti (1614 / 1619) in Rome, see, for example, S. Marinelli 'Verona' in *La Pittura nel Veneto. Il Seicento*, Milan 2000, 1, pp. 342, 346, 350, 352, 355.

- 4 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-411, recto and verso.
The verso is a night scene with the moon shining through the clouds. I suggested the authorship of the drawing and its link to the painting in: Aikema, Meijer 1985, pp. 76-77, no. 58, fig. 58 (recto and verso). See also S. Marinelli, 'Verona' in *La Pittura nel Veneto. Il Seicento*, Milan 2000, 1, pp. 358-60, fig. 472.
- 5 See for paintings by Bernardi, B. Dal Pozzo, *Le vite de pittori, degli scultori et architetti veronesi*, Verona 1778, pp. 156, 172, 217, 223; M. Salazzari Brognara, in L. Magagnato (ed.), *Cinquant'anni di Pittura Veronese 1580-1630* (cat. Verona, Palazzo della Gran Guardia), Vicenza 1974, pp. 100-06; E.M. Guzzo, 'Pietro Bernardi' in *Saur Allgemeine Künstler Lexikon*, Munich, Leipzig 1994, vol. 9, pp. 524-25 among others, for a review of the older literature; S. Marinelli, 'Da Turchi e Gramatica: integrazioni al Seicento', *Verona Illustrata* 14, 2001, pp. 49-50, fig. vi, 47-49, for some recently attributed works. Also see the notes below.
- 6 Dal Pozzo 1778, p. 156. See also Salazzari Brognara, in Magagnato 1974, p. 75, figs. 98-99; Marinelli 2000, 1, p. 356, fig. 459.
- 7 For the drawing (inv. no. RP-T-1953-433, verso; 190 x 288 mm) Aikema, Meijer 1985, pp. 73-74, fig. 54; on the other side of the sheet the artist drew the feet and the lower half of the standing figure clad in a long robe.
- 8 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-421 (180 x 281 mm). Aikema, Meijer 1985, p. 74, no. 55, fig. 55.
- 9 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-429, black chalk and white chalk on discoloured blue-green paper, 186 x 294 mm. In her thesis, which I was able to consult shortly after the exhibition staged in 1985 (see note 1), Britte Ginsberg may or may not have recognized the study, independently, as the work of Bernardi. The painting is mentioned by Dal Pozzo 1718, p. 172. See also Salazzari Brognara, in Magagnato op. cit. (see note 5), pp. 102-03, no. 72, figs. 96-97. The author states (p. 103) that, as in other works by Bernardi, the restoration of the painting revealed the existence of countless pentimenti, for example in the angel at the top where size and gesture were changed, and in the San Carlo who now stands, but had originally been depicted kneeling. There is no mention of whether the woman seen in profile had also originally looked somewhat different. For the painting see also R. Pallucchini, *La Pittura veneziana del Seicento*, Venice 1981, p. 113, fig. 302; Marinelli 2000, 1, p. 356.
- 10 Salazzari Brognara, 'Pietro Bernardi, primo caravagista veronese', *Arte Antica e moderna* 34-36, 1966, pp. 136-40. Salazzari Brognara in Magagnato op. cit. (see note 5), p. 101.
- 11 For this painting see Salazzari Brognara, in Magagnato op. cit. (see note 5), pp. 103-04, no. 73, fig. 95; R. Pallucchini, *La Pittura veneziana del Seicento*, Venice 1981, p. 112, fig. 303; Marinelli 2000, p. 356.
- 12 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-419 (278 x 184 mm).
- 13 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-420 (188 x 294 mm). The drapery is similar in a number of ways to that in Bernardi's *Holy Family with Elizabeth and the Infant John by Candlelight* (Verona, Museo di Castelvecchio). For this painting see Marinelli 2000, 1, p. 357, fig. 458.
- 14 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-422, 288 x 196 mm.
- 15 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-424, 288 x 195 mm.
- 16 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-425, 293 x 192 mm. For the sheet with the angel, see note 8 above.
- 17 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-427, 264 x 172 mm.
- 18 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-430, 282 x 196 mm.
- 19 Inv. no. RP-T-1953-432, 279 x 190 mm.
- 20 The possibility that inv. nos. RP-T-1953-423 and 438, both drawn on recto and verso, are also by Bernardi should not be ruled out, but in my view it is more doubtful.
- 21 S. Marinelli in G. Pavanello (ed.), *Le carte riscoperte. I disegni delle collezioni Donghi, Fissore, Pozzi*, Venice 2008, pp. 29-33, nos. 29-32 with ill., who published the sheets with the correct attribution to Bernardi. The sheets were independently identified as his work by the present writer on the basis of the relevant photographs that are part of the Corpus Gernsheim (G 68912 - G 68914; G 68918 - G 68921), where they are registered as 'Italian school'.
- 22 One of the sheets in Venice has an unidentified watermark. See Marinelli 2008, p. 29, no. 29. Some of the drawings in Amsterdam have watermarks, but the short preparation time for this contribution has precluded any further research into this aspect.
- 23 Meanwhile see C. Simoni (ed.), *Cartai e stampatori a Toscolano. Vicende, uomini, paesaggi di una tradizione produttiva*, Brescia 1995; G.L. Fontana (ed.), *Cartai e stampatori in Veneto. Vicende, uomini, paesaggi di una tradizione produttiva*, Brescia 2001; for some watermarks: F. Formiga, *Le filigrane nelle edizioni di Bartolomeo Merlo e Angelo Tamo (1600-1630) presso la Biblioteca civica di Verona*, Vago | Caldiero 1998.
- 24 Inv. no. 31.033, black chalk heightened with white chalk on discoloured green paper; 289 x 193 mm; inscription on the right in pencil 31.033. Marinelli 2008, no. 29, with ill.

- 25 Guzzo 1994, p. 524; Marinelli 2000, I, p. 358, fig. 461.
- 26 Inv. no. 31.034; black chalk heightened with white chalk on discoloured green paper; 183 x 277 mm. Marinelli 2008, no. 30, with ill.
- 27 Inv. no. 31.039; black chalk heightened with white chalk on brown paper; 275 x 180 mm; inscriptions on recto lower right 2; on verso upper right in pencil 31.039 r/v and lower left 452. Marinelli 2008, no. 32, with ill.
- 28 Inv. no. 31.035; black chalk heightened with white chalk on greyish-green paper; 285 x 185 mm. Marinelli 2008, no. 31, with ill.
- 29 Inv. no. 31.040 r. and v.; black chalk heightened with white chalk on greenish-brown or blue paper; 296 x 190 mm; inscription on recto lower right (1); on verso upper right in pencil 31.040 r/v and lower left 312. Marinelli 2008, no. 33, with ill.
- 30 See for the *Annunciation*, note 6, above. For the *Christ in the Garden of Olives* Dal Pozzo 1718, p. 172; Pallucchini 1981, p. 113, fig. 367; Marinelli 2000, p. 366, fig. 464.
- 31 These are the *Standing Lute Player* and three sheets of figure studies for a *Supper at Emmaus* (Sale Christie's, Paris, 16 December 2005, nos. 260, 261.1-261.3, with ill.; a *Head of a Child*, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, a *Head of a Woman*, a *Man Bending Forward*, all with other studies, not illustrated, on the backs (Sale Christie's, Paris, 23 March 2006, nos. 19-22, with ill.). According to the latter sale catalogue they are all the work of the same seventeenth-century North Italian artist. Andrea Piai identified the hand of Bernardi and drew the sheets to the attention of Marinelli (2008, pp. 29-31), who adopted the attribution.
- 32 The date of 1628 reported by Dal Pozzo 1718, p. 172, for the painting of *Christ in Garden of Olives* is probably incorrect. See Guzzo 1994, p. 524.
- 33 Marinelli 2008, p. 31.
- 34 Cf. e.g. C. Whistler, 'Life Drawing in Venice from Titian to Tiepolo', *Master Drawings* 42, 2004, pp. 370-81.