

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Northern School, mid 16th century

Study of a dromedary, after Gentile Bellini (?)

Pen and brown ink. Inscribed with a number: 28. Bears a watermark: crescent moons within a cross and a circle, see Heawood 882 (Rome 1555)

278 x 407 mm. (11 x 16 in.)

Provenance:

Private collection, France.



Despite its lifelike quality, this fascinating and recently discovered study of a dromedary must be based upon a lost drawing. Two other versions, also dating from the 16th century, are respectively in the British Museum (fig. 1), pen and brown ink on paper, 278 x 412 mm., and the Royal Library at Windsor (fig. 2), pen and brown ink on paper, 292 x 423 mm., inscribed: *Manca u corda di gobba*. Adolfo Venturi and Arthur E. Popham considered the Windsor drawing to be by Pisanello and the British Museum drawing to be a copy after it. The three drawings are very alike in scale and are of considerable size, but are definitely not tracings as both the sheets and the measurements of the three dromedaries are different.



Fig. 1, After Pisanello, *A camel (dromedary)*.
British Museum, London, inv. 1860,0616.111



Fig. 2, After a work attributed to Gentile Bellini, *A dromedary*,
c. 1500-50. Royal Collection, Windsor, RCIN.912815

A study of a similar dromedary, again given to Pisanello, this time reaching its head down to the ground as if to drink, drawn in metalpoint, heightened with pen and brown ink, on vellum, and considerably smaller in dimensions (153 x 185 mm.), is in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (fig. 3).¹ This latter attribution appears to be secure, but the scale of the present work and its Windsor and British Museum fellows, as well as the solidity and accuracy of the depictions, suggest that the original sheet these drawings are after may in fact have belonged to another sphere: most likely that of Gentile Bellini. Thanks to Martin Clayton and Hugo Chapman, a direct comparison of the three drawings was made possible and demonstrated clearly that the Windsor drawing is the earliest and most finely drawn of the three and therefore, plausibly the closest to the original work. The Windsor sheet bears a watermark associated with the 1520s in Venice, but as an extremely similar camel appears in the background of Pinturicchio's *Cavalcade of the Magi* in the Cappella Bella, Santa Maria Maggiore at Spello, which was painted in around 1501, it may be established that the original study must be earlier than that.² It is unlikely that any of the drawings were copied from Pinturicchio's camel, as that one has a double hump – on which a monkey is perched – as well as differences in the details on its neck.³



Fig. 3, Antonio Pisanello, *Camel gazing in profile to the right*.
Louvre Museum, Paris, inv. 2400, recto

¹ *Pisanello, Le Peintre aux sept vertus*, exh. cat., Paris 1996, cat. no. 218.

² While a horse seen from the back in the same fresco has also been said to be taken from a drawing by Pisanello, there are some differences in the pose, and therefore the source may in fact be different.

³ Other camels appear in Pinturicchio's work, such as the pair in the background of one of the Sistine Chapel frescoes illustrating the *Journey of Moses*. By contrast, those are distinctly inaccurate as zoological examples: they have straight foreheads, pointed noses and deer-like ears.

Gentile Bellini travelled to Constantinople from Venice in 1479, as a cultural ambassador, on the request of Sultan Mehmet II following the declaration of peace between the Venetian State and the Ottomans. Venice had consistently favoured accommodation with the Muslim world in order to protect her trade links and the Lagoon had long been full of exotic imports from the near and far East: spices, materials, silver, porcelain and even animals. Relatively little of Gentile's Ottoman work survives: the portrait of Sultan Mehmet II in the National Gallery (fig. 4), London, and the series of almost anthropological drawings of court figures are the most famous,⁴ but the fascination with the East was disseminated by him on his return to Venice and by artists working in his style such as Giovanni Mansueti and the Bellini follower responsible for the painting illustrating *The Reception of the Venetian Ambassadors in Damascus* (probably 1513-16), now in the Louvre (fig. 5), Paris.⁵ Bellini's *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria* (fig. 6), a painting now in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, probably completed by his brother Giovanni, and the *Procession in Piazza San Marco* in the Accademia (fig. 7), Venice, depict, with immense accuracy, figures in Mamluk and Ottoman costume, both men and women. Furthermore, in the background of the *St. Mark* painting one can observe exotic animals strolling - two camels and a huge giraffe - while the *Venetian Ambassadors* picture depicts camels, a monkey and a pair of deer.⁶



Fig. 4, Gentile Bellini, The Sultan Mehmet II, 1480.
National Gallery, London

⁴ C. Campbell & A. Chong (eds.), *Bellini and the East*, exh. cat., London and Boston 2005, cat. no. 23 and cat. nos. 24-30.

⁵ *Pisanello, Le Peintre aux sept vertus*, exh. cat., Paris 1996, cat. no. 2.

⁶ In another case of borrowing, Dürer took three figures from the oriental section of the procession in a drawing now in the British Museum, London, dated 1514: see J. Raby, 'Picturing the Levant', *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*, exh. cat., (ed.) J. A. Levenson, Washington 1991, p. 79.



Fig. 5, Venetian School, *The Reception of the Venetian Ambassadors in Damascus*, probably 1513-16. Louvre Museum, Paris



Fig. 6, Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-7. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



Fig. 7, Gentile Bellini, *Procession in Piazza San Marco*, 1496.
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

The present sheet and its associated drawings show an extraordinary level of detail: the realistic expression of the beast with its drooping eye and lower lip, the slight bagginess of the extended neck, the rather luxuriant tail, the shaggy fore-hump, and the flap of skin (apparently a penile sheath): an individual feature very rarely depicted or photographed, and puzzling even to the specialists at London Zoo.⁷ This feature does also appear in Pinturicchio's fresco, though it may have been understood to be a mammary gland.

As fine drawings and remarkable records of an early encounter by a Western artist with an animal from the East, these three sheets are of significant interest. It remains a matter of speculation, however, as to their authorship. The Windsor sheet has been attributed by Jonathan Raby to Costanzo de Moysis, also known as Costanzo de Ferrara: an artist said to have spent years in Constantinople, but by whom the only securely attributed surviving works seem to be two medals. This suggestion supports, nevertheless, the notion of the original source being a work by a North Italian artist studying imports from the East, whether actual or merely recorded; indeed, Dürer's famous rhinoceros was based upon a description in a letter, which also enclosed an anonymous drawing of the beast imported into Lisbon in 1515.

⁷ Email correspondence dated 7th December 2012: 'Our expert has offered the following information: 'The penis of a camel is covered by a triangular sheath, from which it emerges. This could be an enlarged sheath depicted here (or it may not), and it may in fact be the reason the camel was thought notable for illustration. There are several changes that happen to male camels during the rut, though I am not saying that an enlargement of the sheath is one of them. That's as much as I can offer I'm afraid. It may be worth the enquirer contacting a zoo or even going as far as making enquiries with camel dealers in those countries where they are traded.'