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ABBREVIATIONS
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
The study *A Bat and Two Ears* in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, a drawing executed in red chalk and brush with red wash on paper (fig. 1), is one of the most intriguing in the corpus of Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652). It shows a bat with its wings splayed and suspended above two human ears. The Latin motto *Fulget Semper Virtus* (*Virtue always shines*) is inscribed beneath.

The drawing, whose attribution to Ribera has never been questioned on account of its stylistic correspondence with other sheets that are undoubtedly by the artist, was first identified and catalogued by Jonathan Brown as a work by Lo Spagnoletto (“the little Spaniard”) on the occasion of the 1973 monographic exhibition dedicated to the master.¹ In this instance, Brown did not focus on a stylistic analysis of the drawing. Instead, he examined the
relationship between this sheet and Ribera’s *Studies of Nine Ears*—an etching of an anatomical subject monogrammed by the artist and dated 1622 (fig. 2)—which he considered the chronological reference for dating the drawing. Brown also attempted to decipher the complex meaning of the image, eventually discovering, upon the suggestions of art historians Priscilla Muller and Clara Louisa Penney, a connection between the bat and the artist. According to a legend, this nocturnal mammal lay on the helmet of King Jaime I of Aragon during the battle to retake Valencia from the Moors in 1238. Since 1503, the bat became the emblem of the city and part of its coat of arms. Xàtiva, the town where Ribera was born, was in the province controlled by Valencia (the reason why the artist signed his works as “valencianus” or “valentinus” more than once). Brown concluded that the bat might have been either the artist’s symbol or, alternatively, an indication of a patron from Valencia. Although he stopped there, Brown provided the foundation for further studies; it is this autobiographical lens that guides a new reading of the drawing.

First, however, it is important to revisit the relationship between the Museum’s drawing and the 1622 print. This issue was raised by Gabriele Finaldi, who argued that it is not entirely correct to consider the drawing a preparatory study for the print given the work’s “particularly symmetrical and finished” graphic composition, in which red chalk and watercolor are combined with great delicacy in a skilful sfumato. More precisely, the ear on the right side in Ribera’s drawing can be compared with two versions of the same ear at bottom right in the etching, both of which appear in reverse, and one of which is sketched only in its main lines while the other is perfectly defined. Moreover, the ear at left in Ribera’s drawing can be matched with the first two ears on the top left of the etching, which are shown in the same orientation as in the drawing. This does not necessarily mean that the drawing should be considered as a preliminary work for the print, however. Ribera in fact had at his disposal repertory models from which to draw; the sheet with the bat and the 1622 etching therefore do not need to be understood as a *unicum*, or indivisibly related.

The practice of drawing ears was part of a patternbook tradition familiar to Ribera well before 1622. In particular, it was probably from a 1619 publication by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino, that the artist was inspired to begin his anatomical prints. It is also likely that Ribera made other drawings, today lost, on the same theme before he arrived at the printing.
stage. It is therefore more accurate to interpret the etching and the drawing as only seemingly related, since in the drawing the ear assumes a precise meaning beyond the anatomical, as will be discussed below. This also leads to further reflections useful for a new framing of the Museum’s sheet: if the execution of the print is considered independently from that of the drawing, would the date of the latter still be about 1622? If the two works were indeed made for different purposes, how do we determine the meaning of the drawing in the context of Ribera’s biography at the beginning of the 1620s?

Before turning to an analysis of the drawing, however, the origin of the etching should be discussed. A didactic purpose has traditionally been considered the most persuasive explanation for the existence of the three anatomical plates by Ribera known today. In addition to Studies of Nine Ears, the artist also completed Studies of Thirteen Eyes and Studies of Noses and Mouths, the latter two signed in full by Lo Spagnoletto but not dated. However, it remains unclear whether Ribera was successful enough at this date to have an organized school where these anatomical studies would have been used for educational purposes. All that is known of him at the time is that he had arrived in Naples in 1616, at the age of twenty-five, but his first public success was not until about 1626. Scholars also know little about his audience and patrons. Undoubtedly, his two expertly handled copper etchings made in 1621, Saint Jerome and the Angel and The Penitence of Saint Peter, indicate that Ribera was seeking true success in Naples and elsewhere. If he had begun teaching students in the same period, however, there is still no way to prove it, and we certainly do not know the names of any artists who might have worked with him as early as 1621.

In any case, the literature on the artist has underestimated a connection between Ribera’s Studies of Nine Ears and the instruction manuals for apprentice painters that were inspired by Annibale Carracci and made after drawings (inventione) by his brother, Agostino. Beginning with Elizabeth Du Gué Trapier, scholars have pointed out similarities between the work of Ribera and some of these prints. This affinity is strengthened by the number 4 inscribed on the plate (in reverse) at the bottom right of Ribera’s Studies of Nine Ears—the same number can also be found in some of the prints engraved after Carracci by Luca Ciamberlano.

It was once thought that Ribera planned to produce a teaching manual for use in his workshop but that the project remained unfinished. Some scholars later questioned whether he knew the inventione attributed to Agostino Carracci, considering that the date of publication of the prints after Carracci probably followed that of Ribera’s etchings. Subsequent experts noted that the vividly expressed body parts in Ribera’s plates seemed

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distinct from the tradition of the pattern book. This tradition had originated in the sixteenth century for didactic purposes and was revived at the beginning of the seventeenth century with a treatise by Odoardo Fialetti, a student of Agostino Carracci and the draftsman and etcher of *Il vero modo et ordine per disegnar tutte le parti et membra del corpo humano* (Venice: Justus Sadeler, 1608), which was based on Agostino’s *inventione* and to which three plates by Palma il Giovane were added at a later date.9

The historiography, beginning with Carlo Cesare Malvasia in 1678, has maintained that Annibale Carracci entrusted Luca Ciamberlano to make prints from his brother Agostino’s *inventione* for the volume titled *Scuola perfetta*. This volume was begun about 1609 and was printed in 1614 by Pietro Stefanoni; only in later editions would its title become *Scuola perfetta: Per imparare a bene disegnare tutto il corpo humano parte per parte; Cavatta dalli disegni di Caracci*.10 Another series of eighty-one prints by Ciamberlano (some of which were initialed “LC”) and Francesco Brizio, merged into a study volume, was presumably also produced by Stefanoni (these were catalogued by Adam Bartsch, who was unable to reconstruct their exact order).11 This tradition would have been familiar to a master such as the young Ribera, who had become aware of these *inventione* by Carracci prior to 1611, when he was living in Parma at the service of Mario Farnese and where he became interested in studying the art of Emilia Romagna. Moreover, he must have encountered this tradition during his Roman sojourn and in particular as a member of the Accademia di San Luca (1613-16), around which several Bolognese artists gravitated.12 Even though Ribera’s interpretation of this well-known theme is exceptional, it is nonetheless important to emphasize its clear connections with the plates after the Carracci.13

A reconsideration of *Il vero modo et ordine per disegnar* (published as early as 1608) is likewise essential to this argument. There are clear links between certain ears in Fialetti’s plate number 3, *Studies of Ten Ears* (fig. 3),14 and those in Ribera’s 1622 etching. Ribera placed the ear framed by part of a face at bottom left, while Fialetti placed the same on the outer margins of his plate but repeated it twice, on the right and on the left. Ribera took inspiration from the ear seen in bird’s-eye view. Finally, while all the ears in the top row of each print bear a resemblance, in particular Ribera’s two ears at upper left copy the two engraved by Fialetti at upper right.

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**fig. 3** Odoardo Fialetti (Italian, 1573–1626/7). *Studies of Ten Ears from Il vero modo et ordine per disegnar*, 1608. Etching, 4 × 5⅜ in. (10 × 14.4 cm). Numbered on plate, upper right: 3. Private collection, Germany.
Despite these correspondences between the prints, however, no one has yet taken into account the similarities between Studies of Ten Ears and the Museum’s drawing A Bat and Two Ears (fig. 1). The ear to the left of the bat in Ribera’s drawing is identical to the ear at top right in the Fialetti print. There is also an example of the same ear in the top right corner of another etching from Fialetti’s book—Studies of Eight Ears (fig. 4)—which is numbered 4 at top right. Crucially, this is the same plate number that Ribera inscribed, in reverse, in the lower right corner of his 1622 etching. Moreover, Fialetti’s print is also the source for the ear seen slightly from behind and to the right of the bat in the Museum’s drawing. This ear on the right in Ribera’s drawing is an exact replica of, and represented from the same perspective as, the example in the opposite corner of Fialetti’s engraving, next to the ear decorated with a pearl.

According to Malvasia, by 1618, Father Antonio Mirandola had asked Guercino to produce model sheets for students based on the volumes inspired by Annibale Carracci and by Fialetti, which were engraved in 1619 by Oliviero Gatti. The similarities between Gatti’s Studies of Six Ears (fig. 5) and Ribera’s 1622 etching are indisputable, both for the typologies they present and for their vivid interpretation of the anatomical parts. This text must also have inspired Ribera in his spatial arrangement of the various elements. Unsurprisingly, Gatti’s print is numbered 4 in the treatise, a crucial testimony that proves that Ribera did not randomly attribute this same number to his Studies of Nine Ears. The previous hypothesis, that “the presence of this number [4] implies that a fourth study sheet may have existed at one time” and which was based on the fact that we know of only three anatomical engravings by Lo Spagnoletto, is therefore less convincing. On the contrary, Ribera simply respected the academic tradition preceding him, according to which the “lesson” on this topic was the fourth one.

As mentioned above, it is important to emphasize that it is highly probable that Guercino’s publication, created not long before Ribera’s works, prompted the Spanish artist to execute studies of anatomical subjects. Some affinities between the two artists’ grotesque and caricatural drawings attest that Ribera and Guercino were mutually aware of each other’s creations. This harmony of artistic results is easily explained when one considers Ribera’s admiration, developed in his youth spent between Rome and the Emilia, for the Carracci and their followers, foremost among them Guido Reni. We now turn to the meaning of the drawing.

Scholars unanimously agree that the juxtaposition of the bat and ears, although highly unusual, was
This idea is supported by the fact that the finely elaborated drawing includes the Latin motto *FULGET SEMPER VIRTUS*, indicating that the artist created the work with a specific purpose. Ribera’s care not only in his drawing technique but also in his naturalistic depiction of the bat—studied from life and represented at lifesize—further supports this argument.

Finaldi has argued that the ordered juxtaposition of bat and ears, completed by the Latin motto, makes the image a rebus, in which the bat symbolizes the artist’s hometown, the motto alludes to eternal virtue, and the two ears possibly refer to fame or calumny or both. Consequently, what is the precise meaning of the bat in this instance? Although Ribera’s pairing of human ears with a bat might seem to represent the acute sense of hearing that guides the animal’s nocturnal flight, this fact about bats was not known until the late eighteenth century. The most common meaning attributed to the bat in the artist’s lifetime was the evocation of night and its attributes, including metaphors of blindness, ignorance, and witchcraft.

Therefore, in the scholarship on Ribera the solution to the drawing’s obscure iconography has already been outlined correctly in its principal parts. A literary source contemporary to the drawing, which has never been associated with it and that will be described below, confirms the work’s association with the artist and facilitates an understanding of the drawing’s proper meaning without the need for Ribera’s having a patron from Valencia.

First, however, it should be noted that a recent Spanish translation of Ribera’s motto, *La virtud refulge siempre* (*Virtue always shines*), presents a more accurate interpretation of the Latin verse than the generally accepted English version, *Virtue shines forever.*
The new translation illustrates that the Latin clearly alludes to virtue exercised with constancy. Moral quality (*virtus*) does not shine (*fulget*) “forever” but rather reaffirms itself each time that it is practiced (*semper*). In ancient Rome there was absolute trust in the righteous and virtuous man who exercises moral integrity with perseverance—a pagan concept embraced by Christianity in its faith that Good would conquer Evil. According to this analysis, there is no reason to draw upon Horace’s second ode of the third book of *Odes* to understand Ribera’s use of the Latin motto. To put it simply, the motto means that whoever is righteous and has encountered misfortune due to other people’s malice will see his virtue restored, sooner or later.

The Museum’s drawing might thus be read as the artist’s sophisticated testimony to his contemporaries of a now unknown injustice he suffered. We may infer that he created the drawing after his honor was entirely rehabilitated. Consequently, the bat is not a symbol of Valencia but of the “valencianus,” Ribera. The artist portrayed himself, metaphorically, as the emblem of his hometown, surrounded by enemy ears all too eager to listen to gossip and lies. At the same time, the bat can be interpreted as the emblem of blindness in the face of “virtue,” as indicated by the motto. Moreover, the ears may represent the master’s own, attentive to traps laid by others and alert to the general vicissitudes of life. Ribera furthermore treated the objects as one would in a rebus, isolating and positioning the ears and the bat in sequence. Yet unlike a rebus, Ribera does not use the names of the objects to form a distinct phrase, and instead employs their metaphorical meanings. The objects “speak,” and it is the meaning of the motto that completes their symbolic value. The drawing therefore belongs principally in the category of emblem and only partly in the category of rebus.

The above reading is strongly reinforced by one of the bizarre tales written by Gianbattista Basile (b. 1566?/before 1575–d. 1632), a Neapolitan author and contemporary of Ribera’s whose *Tale of Tales (Lo Cunto delli Cunti)* was famous throughout Europe. The two men undoubtedly knew each other. By 1609 Basile had already dedicated poetic verses to Giovan Bernardino Azzolino, Ribera’s father-in-law, mentor, and the head of the workshop that the artist joined during his first years in Naples. The two would have been in contact also when Basile was serving Antonio Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba (vicery from 1622 to 1629), while Ribera was also a member of the court. This last connection was documented by Jusepe Martínez, a painter from Zaragoza who visited Naples in 1625 and who explicitly described his encounters with his compatriot Ribera at the viceroy’s palace and the smaller Neapolitan courts.

Whatever the relationship between Basile and Ribera, the tale entitled “Corvetto,” in the *Seventh Entertainment (Settimo Passatempo)* of the *Third Day of Lo Cunto*, is highly relevant. The popular vernacular book by Basile was published posthumously in Naples between 1634 and 1636, but the poet started working on it in the mid-1620s. The tale of Corvetto, which invokes the Duke of Alba, is one of the few chapters that contains an explicit hint of the period in which *Lo Cunto* was written. This is not to say that the Museum’s drawing literally translates the content of the tale. Rather, an accurate reading of the text helps to uncover the meanings associated, especially in Naples, with the attributes of the bat and ears as well as the concept of virtue named in the motto. The indications offered by this source are pivotal for understanding the complex symbolism of the drawing.

The tale tells of the travails of Corvetto, a young man who was “envied by the king’s courtiers because of his virtuous qualities.” In an extraordinarily vitriolic preamble, Basile describes the environment at court (presumably in Naples, where both he and Ribera were courtiers) as a customary place of pretense, trickery, slander, and betrayal. He then introduces the protagonist as the king’s favorite, who “for this reason . . . inspired hate and nausea in all of the king’s courtiers, who were bats of ignorance and thus incapable of beholding the shining virtue of Corvetto.” Given the phrase “bats of ignorance,” there cannot be a clearer source for the seventeenth-century meaning of the blindness of the bat, which was commonly used as a metaphor for moral obtuseness, incapacity of understanding, and the inability to respect the virtue of a good man. While in one reading of the Museum’s drawing the bat represents Ribera the Valencian, the story of Corvetto suggests that the animal is also a specific allusion to an ignorant individual unprepared to recognize virtue (*virtus*) which, in the end, triumphs (*semper fulget*). Not by chance, in the drawing, the Latin motto starts and ends in the area between the feet of the terrible winged animal, as if held aloft by the victorious artist himself.

Basile’s text also helps explicate the seventeenth-century meaning of the two ears: as argued above, in one interpretation the ears represent those who are disturbed by slander, which corrodes virtue. At the same time, following “Corvetto,” they can also be read as the alert ears of those who must defend their own virtue:
the breezes of favor that the king blew on him were siroccos [hot winds] to the hernias of those envy-bitten souls, who did nothing but murmur, gossip, whisper, gripe and cut the poor man to pieces. . . . // Oh hapless is he who is condemned to live in that hell that goes by the name of court, where flattery is sold by the basket, malice and bad services measured by the quintal, and deceit and betrayal weighed by the bushel! . . . Who can describe the soap of falsehood used to lubricate the steps to the king’s ears so that Corvetto would tumble down and break his neck? . . . // But Corvetto was enchanted, and he took notice of the traps and uncovered the treachery. . . . He always kept his ears pricked up and his eyes wide open so as not to lose his thread, for he knew that the courtier’s fortune is made of glass.35

Although we cannot be sure that the Museum’s drawing alludes to a court misadventure, it appears to have had something to do with the artist’s temporary fall from favor, perhaps due to the “gossip” of “envy-bitten souls.” Undoubtedly the fortune that he first enjoyed when he arrived in Naples in late 1616 and entered into the good graces of Pedro Téllez-Girón, Duke of Osuna (vicerey from 1616 to 1620), and his wife, Catalina Enríquez de Ribera, would have brought him advantages but also envy in a competitive local artistic environment. He did not receive other such prestigious commissions until much later, while working for the Franciscan community of the Trinità delle Monache, culminating in his painting Saint Jerome and the Angel in 1626, a pivotal year in the artist’s biography.36

This article has demonstrated how the Museum’s drawing, modeled after some of the inventione of Agostino Carracci that were first engraved in 1608, does not necessarily fit the time frame for the 1622 etching Studies of Nine Ears. Differences between these two works of Ribera’s preclude the assumption that the print derives from the drawing. In his analysis of the theme of the defamed artist, Finaldi intelligently drew attention to Ribera’s Drunken Silenus from 1626, an extraordinary painting in which in the lower left corner a snake—classic symbol of envy—bites a cartouche bearing the artist’s signature.37 Should Ribera’s two declarations of a sullied reputation be understood as references to the same episode in his life or at least as allusions to the same period of difficulty that he experienced? Should the drawing perhaps be postdated slightly, to later in the 1620s? Unfortunately, there is not enough information available about the artist’s movements during much of the 1620s to be certain, but further documentary discoveries may yet bring more to light.

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NOTES

Translated from the Italian by Sarah Morgan
1 Brown 1973, pp. 164, 181, no. 3.
2 Ibid., pp. 69–71, no. 7.
3 Finaldi 2005, p. 27.
5 Ribera carried out commissions between 1616 and 1619 for Pedro Téllez-Girón, Duke of Osuna (then viceroy of Naples) and his wife, Catalina Enríquez de Ribera, which remained privately held (see Finaldi 2018 and Farina 2018, pp. 57–73). However, he did not manage to make a public name for himself again until the paintings he made for the Franciscan church of the Trinità delle Monache: Saint Jerome and the Angel (signed and dated 1626) and Trinitas Terrestris (1626–1628/1629), both of which are now held at the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (Q 1930, n. 312 and Q 1930, n. 1793).
7 Du Gué Trapier 1952, p. 29; Brown 1973, p. 70, no. 7.
8 Brown 1973, pp. 16–17, 70.
10 In fact, not all the drawings can be attributed to Agostino alone; neither are all the etchings by Ciamberlano only. See Matilla in Cuenca, Hernández Pugh, and Matilla 2019, pp. 143–52, no. 8.
11 Bartsch XVIII.159–70.
12 See Farina 2014, pp. 68–69.
13 For instance, Studies of Six Eyes, which is initialed “LC,” is numbered 2 in the series, and is the first of the eighty-one plates by Ciamberlano catalogued by Bartsch (XVIII.159.1). The first three female eyes drawn from the top may be compared with the one at the center of the second column from the left in Ribera’s Studies of Thirteen Eyes (Brown 1973, no. 8). Moreover, the latter example may also be considered in relation to Studies of Eight Eyes, an unnumbered engraving that lacks Ciamberlano’s initials but is part of the same series catalogued by Bartsch (XVIII.159.2). This comparison is presented in Farina 2014, p. 59, figs. 54–56.
14 Bartsch XVII.299.214.
XVIII.102.114 and those dedicated to Love and Fortune by year of Basile's birth: in Naples in 1575, or in Giugliano di Campania in 1566 or between 1570 and 1572; see Michele Rak in Basile 2013, p. vii.

23 See Farina 2020, pp. 248–49.
26 There are various hypotheses about the place and the precise year of Basile's birth: in Naples in 1575, or in Giugliano di Neapolitan scene (and which he succeeded in doing not long after). As stated above, it is not certain whether these anatomical exercises were created for didactic purposes. Ribera’s Neapolitan pupils started, in fact, to work with him at the end of the 1620s, if not much later, from 1630 or 1635 on. At the moment, we do not have any evidence indicating that the artist had students born in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

20 For a reconstruction of the connection between the Carracci and the influence of Guido Reni on Ribera (and vice versa), see Farina 2014, paragraphs 1.4–1.5 and the Prefazione to the text by Daniele Benati (ibid., pp. 7–9). Subsequently, Farina 2017 (pp. 61–63) was the first to highlight the possible parallel between Ribera's and Guercino's drawings.

22 Ibid., p. 71.
23 Ibid.
25 The Museum’s drawing lacks the list-like nature of a traditional rebus (consider, for example, the well-known etchings Ogni cosa vince l’oro by Agostino Carracci [1580/1585; Bartsch XVIII.102.114] and those dedicated to Love and Fortune by Stefano Della Bella [ca. 1639; De Vesme and Massar 1971, p. 111, nos. 688 and 689]). It can be more easily read as following the tradition of the illustrated impresa—an emblem, or device with a motto. Although well known in the Renaissance, even to Leonardo, the emblem did not have a theoretical basis until 1555, when Paolo Giovin’s Dialogo dell’imprese militari e amorose was published posthumously. Two emblems in particular seem to most resemble Ribera’s in compositional spirit and imaginative ability. Designed by the eclectic Francesco Salviati, these emblems possibly allude to the concepts of vigilance or prudence (Musée du Louvre, Paris, 12085; and the Morgan Library and Museum, New York, 1979.58; see Alessandro Nova in Monbeig Goguel 1998, pp. 200–201, nos. 69, 70). Salviati was, after all, one of the Italian masters of the sixteenth century to whom Ribera appears to have looked on more than one occasion and with great interest.

26 See note 5 above.
27 See note 5 above.
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