



A Newly Discovered Drawing by François de Nomé

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(In the Breach of Decorum: Painting between Altar and Gallery, Fig. 9, p. 163).

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(In the Breach of Decorum: Painting between Altar and Gallery, Fig. 19, p. 173).

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A Newly Discovered Drawing by François de Nomé

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The Nationalmuseum has recently acquired a drawing depicting an *Altar with the Ark of the Covenant* from the 1620s (?), attributed to François de Nomé (c. 1593–after 1630), a French-born painter active in Naples.¹ The Museum already owns two oil paintings by de Nomé.² The fact that three distinct artistic personalities, including de Nomé, were once erroneously known under the shared name of “Monsù Desiderio” has resulted in unnecessary confusion.³ Born in Metz in the duchy of Lorraine, de Nomé went to Rome as a child and stayed there some eight years. He was taught painting by a Maestro Baldassare, possibly the Flemish landscape painter Balthasar Lauwers (1578–1645). In 1610 de Nomé went to Naples, where he seems to have remained for the rest of his life. It is not known when he died.

De Nomé, whose paintings were “discovered” in the 20th century by an audience attuned to Surrealism and art brut, specialised in deeply eccentric architectural capricci, in which the lighting has a flickering, ghostly quality.⁴ In the 17th century, these were described as “perspectives”, a genre associated with northern art. Possible sources of inspiration for de Nomé’s work include Roman and Neapolitan monuments, and the architectural views of Hans Vredeman de Vries, Jacques Androuet du Cerceau and Wendel Dietterlin.⁵ Several paintings are inscribed with dates in the early 1620s, but questions of chronology are complicated owing to the idiosyncratic nature of de



Fig. 1 François de Nomé (c. 1593–after 1630), *Altar with the Ark of the Covenant*, 1620s (?). Pen and brown ink, brown wash, watercolour, body colour, heightened with white, partially incised, on light brown paper, 295 x 215 mm. Purchase: the Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 11/2018.

Nomé's art. Several of his patrons are known to have belonged to the elite society of Naples.

The Stockholm drawing depicts an imaginary altar holding the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets of the Law. The design of the Ark itself is similar to that in an Old Testament scene by de Nomé of c. 1620–1624, showing the interior of the Temple of Jerusalem with King David kneeling before the Ark, which is placed on an altar with a Gothic backdrop, flanked by twisting columns.⁶ The altar structure in the drawing displays a comparable mixture of classical and Gothic design elements. Special attention was paid to the rendering of different materials. In the upper tier, pairs of Solomonic columns flank the wooden Ark with its gilded Gothic cherubs. A metal pole designed for carrying is fixed to its front. At the base of the structure is an altar table with a front of varicoloured marble resting on gilded lions. Placed on top of it are two antique marble figures holding cornucopias, flanking antique urns with gilt ornaments and a Gothic reliquary in precious metal. Incised diagonal lines along the top and bottom were undoubtedly intended as an aid in the perspectival construction, but were not consistently followed in the final design.

Giorgio Vasari had defined Gothic as a northern style introduced to the Italian peninsula after the barbarian invasions. The coexistence of classical and Gothic forms in works by de Nomé could be taken to represent the licence of the capriccio. But by employing such stylistic anachronisms, or example in paintings of the Jerusalem Temple, de Nomé also suggests a subtle if ambiguous blurring of the distinctions between the idols of the past and representations of Christian worship. The Ark of the Covenant depicted in these scenes had been used by Counter-Reformation theologians as a prototype for the Christian cult image in their defence of the veneration of images and relics within the Catholic Church. In this context, the

Solomonic columns preserved in St Peter's, and soon to be reused by Bernini for his baldacchino, exemplify the continuity of cult practices from the era of the Old Law to Christianity.

No other drawings by the artist have yet been discovered. However, the two-tiered structure of the altar in the drawing recalls the tomb monuments seen in several perspectival church interiors by de Nomé. The elongated, strangely "animated" and luminous marble statues, such a conspicuous feature of the drawing, belong to the standard repertoire of the painter. And the limited palette of warm dark browns, and more thickly applied white and golden-yellow lights, producing a strong chiaroscuro effect, is also closely comparable to that of de Nomé's canvases. Taken together, these features would seem to support an attribution to de Nomé.

Notes:

1. François de Nomé (c. 1593–after 1630), *Altar with the Ark of the Covenant*, 1620s (?), pen and brown ink, brown wash, watercolour, body colour, heightened with white, partially incised, on light brown paper, 295 x 215 mm. Laid down. Partially oxidised lead white; tinted insert (2 mm wide) along the lower left edge. Inscribed on the mount (19th c.?): "Jean Goujon". Purchased with funds provided by the Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. For a biography of the artist, see Raffaello Causa, "Francesco Nomé detto Monsù Desiderio", *Paragone*, 75 (1956), pp. 30–46; F. Sluys, *Didier Barra et Francois de Nomé dits Monsù Desiderio* (Paris 1961); Maria Rosaria Nappi, "F. de Nomé, un problema di fortuna critica", *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Raffaele Causa* (Naples 1988), pp. 167–174; Maria Rosaria Nappi, *Francois de Nomé e Didier Barra: l'enigma Monsù Desiderio* (Milan and Rome 1991); *François de Nomé: Mysteries of a Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Painter* (exh. cat., The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, 1991–1992), pp. 13–19; Maria Rosaria Nappi, Monique Sary et al., *Enigma, Monsù Desiderio: Un fantastique architectural au XVIIe siècle* (exh. cat., Musées de la Cour d'Or, Metz, 2004); S. Blin, "L'énigmatique Monsù Desiderio", *Connaissance des Arts*, 623 (2005), pp. 66–71; Morten Steen Hansen, exhibition review of Metz 2004, in *The Burlington Magazine*, 147 (2005), pp. 202–204.

2. NM 5278 and NM 6829; see Pontus Grate, *French Paintings, I: Seventeenth Century* (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1988), nos. 23 and 24.

3. In addition to François de Nomé, the name "Monsù Desiderio" has been applied to his contemporary, the landscape painter Didier Barra (c. 1585–after 1656), who specialised in topographical vedute, and to the Italian engraver Francesco Desideri. De Nomé and Barra were both born in Metz and pursued their careers in Naples. See Causa 1956, and J. Patrice Marandel in Houston 1991–1992. For an earlier article identifying Monsù Desiderio with the engraver Francesco Desideri, see A. Scharf, "Francesco Desiderio", *The Burlington Magazine*, 92 (1950), pp. 18–22.

4. Some critics took de Nomé's works to be symptomatic of schizophrenia; see A. L. Romdahl, "Notes on Monsù Desiderio", *Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift* 50 (1944–1945), pp. 3–15, and F. Sluys, "Monsù Desiderio peintre de l'irréel", *La vie médicale: Art et psychopathologie* (1956), pp. 53–63.

5. Nappi 1988. Nomé was also influenced by the German and Netherlandish tradition represented in Roman artistic circles by Adam Elsheimer, Paul Bril and Jacob van Swanenburgh; see P. Seghers, "L'invitation aux enfers", *Connaissance des Arts* (1981), pp. 41–47. Connections have also been found with the scenography of contemporary dramas and ballets; see Causa 1956.

6. François de Nomé, *David in the Temple*, c. 1620–1624, oil on canvas, 79 x 101 cm, Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg; see Atsushi Tanigawa, *Monsu Desiderio* (Tokyo 1995), no. 24, ill.; and Monique Sary, Maria Rosaria Nappi et al., *Enigma Monsù Desiderio: Un fantastique architectural au XVIIe siècle* (exh. cat., Metz, Musées de la Cour d'Or, 2004–2005), pp. 136–139, ill.