

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

A Seated Female Nude

Red chalk, with stumping.

268 x 198 mm. (10 1/2 x 7 3/4 in.)

Watermark: A cockerel standing on three mountains.

As has been noted, 'Guercino...showed great accomplishment in the use of red chalk. This allowed for less tonal range than black chalk, as the darks have necessarily to be less dark than those achieved with the other medium. But this is compensated for by the warmth of the hue inherent in red chalk. Guercino exploited its painterly softness to convey a lifelike transience with a mastery achieved by few other artists...In his later years he resorted to red chalk rather more frequently with a loose, impressionistic touch, the rapidity of which on occasion served to replace pen and wash...Few other artists of his period used the graphic device of stumping as efficiently as did Guercino. This he employed in his more finished red chalk drawings to convey the subtle tonal transitions between the half-tones and the lights. The usual technique was simply to smudge the chalk, although occasionally chalk granules were mixed with water and applied with a brush. Stumping was particularly useful for rendering delicate nuances of light over flesh...'

As Nicholas Turner has noted, 'Guercino's drawings of the female nude are among the rarest, most sought-after of the master's figure drawings.' The present sheet, which is in exceptional condition, would appear to be a study for a bathing nude, likely a Susanna, Venus or Bathsheba. A closely comparable

study of a female nude, in an almost identical pose, appears in a late red chalk compositional study of Susanna and the Elders, part of a large album of drawings assembled by Padre Sebastiano Resta (1635-1714) and known as the Codice Resta, now in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan.

Although Turner published the present sheet as a study for the figure of Venus in Guercino's painting of The Toilet of Venus of c.1622-1623, painted during the artist's Roman period and today in the Goethe Academy in Renaissance, California, this drawing is likely to date from somewhat later in the artist's career, around the second half of the 1630s. A stylistic comparison may be made with a red chalk drawing of Cleopatra, of the same period, in the British Museum.

Literature:

Nicholas Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino: A Revised and Expanded Catalogue raisonné*, Rome, 2017, p.382, under no.118.1 (as location unknown).

Artist description:

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Il Guercino ('the squinter') because he was cross-eyed, was by the second decade of the 17th century one of the leading painters in the province of Emilia. Born in Cento, a small town between Bologna and Ferrara, Guercino was largely self-taught, although his early work was strongly influenced by the paintings of Ludovico Carracci. In 1617 he was summoned to Bologna by Alessandro Ludovisi, the Cardinal Archbishop of Bologna, and there painted a number of important altarpieces, typified by the Saint William Receiving the Monastic Habit, painted in 1620 and now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna. When Ludovisi was elected Pope Gregory XV in 1621, Guercino was summoned to Rome to work for the pontiff and his nephew, Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi. It was in Rome that Guercino painted some of his most celebrated works, notably the ceiling fresco of Aurora in the Casino Ludovisi and the large altarpiece of The Burial and Reception into Heaven of Saint Petronilla for an altar in Saint Peter's. The papacy of Gregory XV was short-lived, however, and on the death of the Pope in 1623 Guercino returned to his native Cento. He remained working in Cento for twenty years, though he continued to receive commissions from patrons throughout Italy and beyond, and turned down offers of employment at the royal courts in London and Paris. Following the death of Guido Reni in 1642, Guercino moved his studio to Bologna, where he received commissions for religious pictures of the sort that Reni had specialized in, and soon inherited his position as the leading painter in the city.

Guercino was among the most prolific draughtsmen of the 17th century in Italy, and his preferred medium was pen and brown ink, although he also worked in red chalk, black chalk, and charcoal. He appears to have assiduously kept his drawings throughout his long career, and to have only parted with a few of them. Indeed, more drawings by him survive today than by any other Italian artist of the period. On his death in 1666 all of the numerous surviving sheets in his studio passed to his nephews and heirs, the painters Benedetto and Cesare Gennari, known as the 'Casa Gennari'.

The drawings of Guercino, which include figural and compositional studies, landscapes, caricatures and genre scenes, have always been coveted by later collectors and connoisseurs. Indeed, the 18th century amateur Pierre-Jean Mariette noted of the artist that 'Ce peintre a outre cela une plume tout-à-faite séduisante'. The largest extant group of drawings by Guercino is today in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle; these were acquired from the Gennari family by King George III's librarian, Richard Dalton, between about 1758 and 1764.