

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

The Virgin of the Rosary with Saints Dominic and Catherine of Siena

Pen and brown ink and brown wash.

Inscribed Guercino and numbered 7 on the verso.

401 x 267 mm. (15 3/4 x 10 1/2 in.)

Only recently rediscovered in a French private collection, this important drawing can be related to two major altarpiece commissions of the same subject, undertaken by Guercino in the late 1630s and early 1640s. The present sheet is most closely related to the large altarpiece of The Virgin and Child Presenting Rosaries to Saints Dominic and Catherine of Siena, painted between 1640 and 1642 for the high altar of the church of San Marco Evangelista in the Marchigian town of Osimo and still in situ there. The painting is thought to have been ordered from Guercino by the Bishop of Osimo, Agostino Simone Galamini (known as Cardinal Aracoeli after his titular church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome), shortly before his death in 1639, and the commission was thereafter assumed by the church authorities in honour of their recently deceased bishop. As is noted in a document of 20 June 1640, the patrons requested that they be shown a preparatory drawing for the composition, for the approval of the Congregation. Later the same year, in October 1640, the painting is recorded as a work in progress by a visitor to Guercino's studio. The altarpiece was probably completed sometime in 1642, when it was sent from Cento to Osimo, although the final payment of the total cost of 400 scudi was only received in April 1643. In the final painting, the small figures in the background are probably the work of a studio assistant, possibly Bartolomeo Gennari.

Another pen and ink compositional drawing by Guercino for the Osimo altarpiece, formerly in the collection of Queen Christina of Sweden, is today in the Teyler Museum in Haarlem, while a third, drawn in red chalk and highly finished, is in the collection of the Dukes of Devonshire at Chatsworth. Among preparatory studies for individual figures in the painting is a pen and ink study for the Virgin in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle and a pen drawing for two of the putti at the top right of the composition, which appeared at auction in London in 1974. Another study for the putti in the upper half of the altarpiece, drawn in red chalk, was formerly with Stephen Ongpin Fine Art and was recently acquired by the National Trust for The Vyne in Basingstoke, Hampshire. Finally, an untraced pen and ink drawing of the Virgin and Child, formerly in the collection of the Baron de Malaussena and sold at auction in Amsterdam in 1927, has been tentatively related to the Osimo canvas.

Some elements of the present sheet are also found in a slightly earlier altarpiece, with a different composition, of the same subject of The Virgin of the Rosary with Saints Dominic and Catherine of Siena, painted for the Compagnia del Rosario in Turin and placed in the church of San Domenico there in 1637. As is sometimes the case with Guercino's compositional drawings, some confusion exists in determining which of the artist's studies of this subject are related to one or the other of the two painted versions of The Virgin of the Rosary with Saints Dominic and Catherine of Siena; the Turin painting of 1637 or the Osimo altarpiece of a few years later. Compositional studies by Guercino for the Turin painting include a red chalk drawing in the British Museum and a pen and ink sheet in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. The pose of Saint Catherine in the present sheet, however, is close to that in the Morgan drawing, which has in the past been regarded as a preparatory study for the Osimo canvas.

A later copy of the present sheet by the 18th century Florentine engraver Francesco Bartolozzi (1727-1815), in the Albertina in Vienna, is part of a group of around fifteen copies of Guercino drawings by Bartolozzi in that collection. In the late 1750s and early 1760s, Bartolozzi seems to have had access to the large corpus of Guercino drawings in the Casa Gennari and made drawn copies after several of them; this would suggest the likelihood that the present sheet has a Casa Gennari provenance.

The present sheet bears the collector's mark of the 20th century French art dealer Charles Férault (1877-1957), who began acquiring drawings from around 1910 onwards. Férault's mark was applied only to those drawings - mostly by French and Italian artists - in his own collection, and not works held as stock.

Literature:

Nicholas Turner and Carol Plazzotta, Drawings by Guercino from British Collections, exhibition catalogue, London, 1991, p.138, under no.113 (as lost); Sir Denis Mahon, Giovanni Francesco Barbieri il Guercino 1591-1666: Disegni, exhibition catalogue, Bologna, 1991 [pub. 1992], p.158, under no.90 and p.176, under no.110 (as lost); Veronika Birke and Janine Kertész, Die Italienischen Zeichnungen der Albertina: Generalverzeichnis, Vol.II, Vienna, 1994, p.743, under Inv.1377 (as lost); John Marciari, Guercino: Virtuoso Draftsman, exhibition catalogue, Morgan Library and Museum, New York, 2019-2020, p.78, under no.20 (as lost, and preparatory for the 1637 Turin painting).

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.