Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

An Evangelist Seated at a Table Writing

Pen and brown ink.

Laid down on part of an old mount.

Inscribed Guercino at the lower left and Guerchino on the backing sheet.

173 x 157 mm. (6 3/4 x 6 1/8 in.)

As Denis Mahon and Nicholas Turner have noted, 'Pen and ink was perhaps Guercino's most natural medium of expression. This technique more than any other allowed for rapidity of execution, but it also required great presence of mind, since the possibility of correcting what had been drawn before was of course limited. It thus gave scope to Guercino's spontaneity, a quality so evident in his drawings but less apparent in the more formal process of painting. In his pen studies he combined the expansive movements of the free drawing of some parts with the tighter rhythms of the more measured drawing of others; in these more controlled passages he picked out certain details with the utmost care. Such contrasts in the pace of the line can be seen in practically all his drawings in the medium.'

Datable to the second half of the 1640s, this highly finished drawing does not appear to be related to any extant painting by Guercino, and as such its purpose is difficult to determine. As Nicholas Turner and Carol Plazzotta have written of Guercino's drawings of the 1640s, 'The drawings in this decade, especially those in pen and ink, are surprisingly uninhibited compared with the disciplined finish of the pictures for which many are preparatory. Characteristic of the pen drawings of this moment is an almost heavy-handed line, accompanied by equally emphatic passages of cross hatching.'

Among stylistically comparable drawings of this period is a compositional study at Holkham Hall in Norfolk for a 1646 easel painting of Samson and Delilah, and a drawing of A Pope and a Bearded

Saint Conversing at Windsor Castle, which is a study for an altarpiece of All Saints in Glory, commissioned from Guercino in 1645 and completed two years later.

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.