

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

Landscape with Travellers Before a Rustic Building

Pen and brown ink.

195 x 192 mm. (7 3/4 x 7 5/8 in.)

Although painted landscapes are a feature of some of Guercino's early works, such as the frescoes in the Casa Pannini in Cento painted between 1615 and 1617, the artist produced relatively few landscapes, and in only a handful of his mature works is there a prominent landscape background. The practice of landscape drawing, however, occupied Guercino throughout his career, and such drawings account for a large and prominent part of his oeuvre. (Indeed, it has been noted that more landscape studies by Guercino are known than by almost any other Italian draughtsman of the period, with the possible exception of Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi.) These drawings appear not to have been intended as studies for his paintings, and instead were done for their own sake; drawn for the artist's own pleasure or, perhaps, occasionally given away as gifts. As Denis Mahon and Nicholas Turner have pointed out, 'Since they are not connected with his figure paintings, they presumably cannot have been made with any expectation of financial gain. For an artist who was attentive to such matters, besides being under pressure for time from his numerous commissions, this dedication to what might be considered a merely peripheral activity bespeaks Guercino's devotion to what he himself must have considered of some importance.'

Almost always executed in pen and ink, but only very rarely with wash, Guercino's landscape drawings display little of the reworking and experimentation so typical of his figure studies. Carefully composed and incorporating such stock elements as solitary windblown trees, many of these drawings were probably not drawn on the spot, although they often contain motifs reminiscent of the landscape and river of the artist's native town of Cento. Indeed, while a number of Guercino's landscape drawings appear to depict actual views in and around Cento, most are imaginary views, combining different topographical and figural motifs in a fanciful manner to create a pleasing scene. As Mahon and Turner note, 'As statements, many of [these landscape drawings] have a completeness not found in his more experimental and hastily drawn figure studies, and they contain something of the force and concentration of a painting rather than a drawing. In them the artist demonstrates the fecundity and

power of his imagination by inventing a scene, shaping the space within it, giving the whole a unity by the suggestion of light and, finally, evoking a mood – all within the confines of a relatively small piece of paper.’

In many of Guercino’s landscape drawings, there is an echo of the pastoral views of 16th century Venetian artists such as Giorgione, Titian and Domenico Campagnola. (The last of these, like Guercino, drew a large number of landscapes as independent works of art.) The artist may also have found other sources of inspiration in the work of such contemporaries in Rome as Agostino Tassi, Annibale Carracci, Domenichino and Paul Bril, all of whom produced landscape drawings. It has been further suggested that Guercino may have been influenced by Netherlandish landscape prints of the early 17th century, of which he may have owned some examples; he is certainly known to have admired the etchings of Rembrandt.

The present sheet is a fine and characteristic example of Guercino’s landscape drawings. A sense of spatial recession is achieved by the artist’s use of the pen, with darker and thicker strokes of ink in such prominent foreground elements as the trees at the left becoming progressively lighter and more delicate as the eye moves through the landscape towards the far distance. As Sir Denis Mahon noted of the present sheet, when it was included in the important exhibition of Guercino drawings held in Bologna in 1991, on the four hundredth anniversary of the artist’s birth, ‘This drawing [is a] typical example of how Guercino worked, quickly sketching out new landscape ideas.’

As has been noted, ‘there are always interesting details to be noted in Guercino’s landscapes’, and in this drawing it may be observed that the prominent building, despite its rustic appearance, is decorated with a grand stemma, or coat of arms. The inclusion of figures in the foreground is also typical of Guercino; as Turner has written of his landscapes, ‘Another characteristic of these drawings is the endless stream of little figures dotted about, enlivening the scene and at the same time providing a sense of scale: wayfarers, country folk engaged in different occupations, children playing together and the occasional yapping dog.’

Comparable landscapes by Guercino executed in the same rapidly-drawn pen technique include a Landscape with a Central Tree and a Church Spire in the Distance in the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas in Austin and a Landscape with a Church on a Hill in a private collection. A school copy of the present sheet, more horizontal in orientation, is among the extensive collection of drawings by Guercino and his studio acquired from the Casa Gennari for the Royal Collection, and today at Windsor Castle.

Guercino’s landscape drawings were greatly admired well into the 18th century. Indeed, as early as about 1674 a series of fourteen of his landscape drawings were sent by the artist’s nephews Benedetto and Cesare Gennari to Paris to be engraved by the printmaker Jean Pesne. These were published a few years later in Italy, accompanied by a frontispiece designed by Cesare Gennari, while the original drawings were acquired soon afterwards for the collection of the Dukes of Devonshire at Chatsworth. The largest extant group of landscape drawings by Guercino, numbering almost forty sheets, is today in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle.

This landscape is likely to have been part of the large group of drawings by Guercino that remained in his studio at the time of his death and were kept at the Casa Gennari in Bologna. According to the

Bolognese biographer Carlo Cesare Malvasia, the Gennari collection included 'Ten volumes of drawings, some in pen, some in red and black chalk, with a variety of exquisitely drawn landscapes'. In the inventory of the Casa Gennari, drawn up in October 1719, several albums of drawings by Guercino are listed, one of which contained ninety-two landscapes ('Disegni à Penna ed' Acquarella rapresentanti vedute di Paesi diversi'), while another was partly made up of 'Paesi piccolo di Penna, Acquerella, e Lapis', amounting to some sixty-nine sheets. Of the two hundred landscape drawings by Guercino listed in the 1719 inventory, five were valued very highly, at twenty-five lire each. Furthermore, in another indication of how these works were particularly highly regarded, some thirty landscape drawings by Guercino were framed and displayed on the walls of the Casa Gennari in Bologna and the family's country villa at Bel Poggio, outside the city.

Exhibitions

Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico, *Il Guercino: disegni*, 1991, no.183; New York, W. M. Brady & Co., *Old Master Drawings, Oil Sketches, and Sculpture 1520-1900*, 2018, no.11.

Literature:

Denis Mahon and Nicholas Turner, *The Drawings of Guercino in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, Cambridge, 1989, p.169, under no.584; Sir Denis Mahon, *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri il Guercino 1591-1666: Disegni*, exhibition catalogue, Bologna, 1991 [pub. 1992], p.286, no.183; Massimo Pulini, 'Guercino di fronte al paesaggio', in Massimo Pulini, ed., *Guercino: racconti di paese. Il paesaggio e la scena popolare nei luoghi e nell'epoca di Giovanni Francesco Barbieri*, exhibition catalogue, Cento, 2001, p.61, p.64, fig.12 (as Cesare Gennari).

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-fait 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.