

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

The Virgin and Child with a Pot of Lilies

Red chalk, with framing lines in red chalk.

296 x 232 mm. (11 5/8 x 9 1/8 in.)

The medium of red chalk, which he exploited with great skill to achieve subtle gradations of texture and tone, was an essential part of Guercino's draughtsmanship for most of his career. After his return to Bologna from Rome in 1623 the artist began to use the medium regularly, usually to further study the pose of a figure once the initial compositional studies in pen and ink had been completed. In his handling of red chalk, he was particularly influenced by the drawings of Annibale Carracci and, from an even earlier generation of Emilian artists, Correggio. (Indeed, he appears to have owned drawings by both of these artists.) As Nicholas Turner and Carol Plazzotta have noted, 'Guercino was...skilled in the use of red chalk, obtaining with it many outstanding effects. Red chalk limits the draughtsman to a narrower tonal range than black chalk or pen and wash, but it facilitates more subtle gradations within the range; it also provides an attractively warm hue, which Guercino exploited to the full to bring his figures to life in all their sensuousness.' As his career progressed, his use of red chalk became more frequent, especially from the 1650s onwards.

Datable to the late 1630s or the 1640s, this highly finished drawing in red chalk does not have the appearance of being a preparatory study for a painting. Instead, it is likely to have been intended as an autonomous work of art, as is further suggested by the drawn framing lines in red chalk. Such finished drawings in this attractive medium were certainly popular with later collectors. As the 19th century picture restorer Frederick Peter Seguer noted, in his *Dictionary of the Works of Painters*, published in 1870, 'Guercino was a good draughtsman, and his sketches in red chalk are favourites with collectors.'

In terms of subject, medium and style, this drawing can be likened to an equally finished red chalk study of *The Virgin and Child with a Book and a Pot of Pinks* of c.1635-1638, in the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. A counterproof of the Morgan drawing is in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, which was in turn used as a model for an undated engraving by Francesco Curti.

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.