Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

A Monk with a Staff

Red chalk, with a framing line in red chalk at the bottom.

Numbered 56 on the old backing sheet.

197 x 193 mm. (7 3/4 x 7 5/8 in.)

Watermark: Coat of arms with crossed swords or keys, and oak leaves.

The present sheet is a fine example of Guercino's late style, when the artist was tending towards a lighter, more 'feathery' and impressionistic manner in his chalk drawings. This drawing of a monk with a staff, which possibly represents Saint Anthony Abbot, is likely to be a study for a three-quarter length painting, to judge from the border line the artist has drawn at the bottom of the sheet. A counterproof may have been made from this drawing.

A stylistic comparison may be made with a red chalk study of Saint Bruno in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which is a study for a painting executed by Guercino in 1647 for the Certosa in Bologna. Also similar is a drawing in red chalk of an old man holding a staff, with a Casa Gennari and Bouverie provenance, that recently appeared at auction.

The Swiss collector René de Cérenville (1875-1968) was a journalist, writer and critic whose collection of Italian, Netherlandish, French and Swiss drawings was in part inherited from his father, the physician Edouard de Cérenville (1843-1915). The younger de Cérenville bequeathed part of his collection of drawings to the Musée Jenisch in Vevey. The present sheet, however, remained with his descendants until 2007, when it was acquired at auction by the renowned Swiss neurosurgeon Sylvia Legrain (1936-

2022).

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.