

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri GUERCINO (Cento 1591 - Bologna 1666)

The Head of a Bearded Man (Saint Joseph?)

Red chalk, with stumping.

Laid down on an old mount with double framing lines in brown ink.

Numbered N782 and 114 in brown ink and N 5222 in black chalk on the reverse of the old mount.

196 x 140 mm. (7 3/4 x 5 1/2 in.) [sheet]

Although Guercino used chalk throughout much of his long career, it never really replaced pen and ink as his preferred medium until late in his life. While the artist remained very busy with commissions right up until his death in 1666, he seems to have drawn less in his later years. Indeed, compared to his output as a draughtsman before 1650, relatively few drawings - many of which are in red chalk - survive from the last fifteen years of his life.

Both David Stone and Nicholas Turner have suggested that the present sheet should be dated, on stylistic grounds, to the late 1650s or the first half of the 1660s, towards the end of Guercino's career. The hint of a framing line in red chalk at the bottom of the composition might suggest that this drawing was intended to study a bust-length painting of the head of a saint, most likely Saint Joseph. Indeed, the head in the present sheet is close to that in a late painting of Saint Joseph of c.1659-1660, recently on the art market, which was one of several half- or three-quarter length paintings of saints commissioned from Guercino between 1659 and 1662 by the textile merchant Francesco Magnanoni of Rimini.

Among stylistically similar late red chalk drawings by Guercino is a study of the head of a young woman, of similar dimensions and with an identical framing line at the bottom, in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Also comparable is one of the artist's last known compositional studies; a red chalk drawing of The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist which recently appeared at auction in New York and has been identified as a study for a lost painting of 1660.

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.