

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

GUERCINO

AN ARTISTIC GENIUS MUCH ESTEEMED IN HIS LIFETIME

Even as a baby in his cradle they noticed he was cross-eyed, and so Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666) became known as *Il Guercino*, “the little squinter,” a nickname that stuck until his death. Luckily, this handicap did not seem to affect his drawing or painting skills.

Born in Cento, a small town between Bologna and Ferrara in Emilia-Romagna, today famous for its carnival celebrations, Guercino’s talent was recognized early by the local painter Benedetto Gennari.

Guercino himself declared that the painting that influenced him the most was the *Madonna with St. Francis* by Louis Carracci (1555-1619), a cousin of the more famous Annibale, in a local church. According to www.answers.com/topic/guercino, “from it Guercino learned about deep, rich colors, applied loosely in the Venetian way, and about the new more intimate manner of interpreting religious themes.”

Largely self-taught and a precocious master draughtsman, by 1615 he was sent to study in Bologna before he migrated to Rome in 1621 during the papacy of Gregory XV Ludovisi, also from Emilia and Guercino’s principal patron.

Probably the reason that curator Rossella Vodret did not include even one of his paintings in the mega-exhibition “Rome at the Time of Caravaggio” (*Inside the Vatican*, Jan. 2012, pp. 46-47) was that Guercino’s talent was so much greater than that of most of his contemporaries, whether they were followers of Caravaggio or of Annibale Carracci, that she wanted to dedicate a monographic exhibition to him.

Another possible reason was that Vodret wanted to present a remarkable exhibition of a top-talented artist in the Baroque Palazzo



Above, *Aurora*, 1621, fresco, Casino Ludovisi, Rome, Italy.

Bottom, *St. Charles Borromeo Restoring Sight to an Infant*, 1613-14, Church of St. Sebastian, Renazzo di Cento, Italy



Barberini’s huge (1,000 square meters) ground floor temporary exhibition space, Rome’s second largest after Palazzo Venezia, recently opened for this purpose after years of battles to evict the Armed Forces Club.

In memory of the recently-deceased (he died on April 27, 2011 at the age of 100) distinguished British art historian and collector Sir Denis Mahon, who wrote many works on Guercino, on display here until April 29 are 36 large canvasses on loan from churches and museums in the artist’s birthplace or in Rome, but not from elsewhere. These works span Guercino’s long career.

The four earliest, two frescoes of *God the Father* and of *The Annunciation* and two canvasses of *St. Charles Borromeo in Adoration* and *A Miracle of St. Charles Borromeo* (giving sight to a blind infant), date to 1613-14, before he left Cento, and the last here, of *Diana the Huntress*, to c. 1658.

The exhibition is divided into three sections. The first and largest includes his early works, all on loan from Cento; the second displays works he executed in Rome; and the third his later works after his return to Emilia Romagna in 1623 when Pope Gregory XV Ludovisi died and he lost his protector. The three sections are clearly distinct from one another by the bright colors of their walls: cobalt, crimson, and lilac.

Guercino was very highly esteemed during his lifetime, especially for his drawings and the blueness of his skies. His early style — even he claimed so — was influenced by Ludovico Carracci and his cousins Annibale and Agostino, particularly by their dramatic use of light and shade and the tender naturalism of their style. Some of his later pieces resemble those of his contemporary Guido Reni and are painted with more lightness

and clearness. They are more academic and lack the bravura and *chiaroscuro* effects of his earlier paintings. The blog *The Pines of Rome* points out: "Guercino never quite fit in with his fellow artists. His work was too sensitive and full of emotion to be considered classical, yet too colorful and romantic to be considered naturalistic. He struck the happy medium between Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio, although in his early period he occasionally showed signs of being influenced by Caravaggio," which seems odd, since he did not see any of Caravaggio's works in person until he worked in Rome from 1621-23.

These two years in Rome were very productive. Guercino became interested in a more classical, restrained style of painting. His first Roman work was probably the frescoes of *Aurora* at the casino of the Villa Ludovisi on the Pincian Hill, as well as those of the ceiling of the main hall on the villa's *piano nobile* depicting *Fame, Honor, and Virtue*. Other Roman works include the ceiling in the Church of San Crisogono (1622) of *St. Chrysogonus in Glory*, his portrait of Pope Gregory XV (now in the Getty Museum, and considered by Mahon to be Guercino's masterpiece), and *The Burial of St. Petronilla* or *St. Petronilla Altarpiece* (c. 1623), commissioned by Pope Gregory for the saint's chapel in St. Peter's Basilica which contained her relics transferred there in 1606 from the Catacombs and on loan here from Rome's Capitoline Museums. It simultaneously depicts the burial and the welcoming to heaven of the martyred St. Petronilla. Mahon considered this huge altarpiece to be Guercino's watershed work, which separated his youthful style from his more mature one, perhaps due to the importance of the commission. Petronilla means "little stone" and St. Petronilla is believed to be the daughter of St. Peter.

Guercino was remarkable for the extreme rapidity of his execution. Although only 36 of his paintings are on display here, he completed no fewer than 106 large altarpieces for churches and about 150 other paintings. In 1626, after his return to Emilia-Romagna, he began his frescoes of Piacenza's Cathedral. In 1642, soon after Guido Reni's death, he moved from Cento to Bologna. Unlike many painters of his time, Guercino continued to paint and teach up to the time of his death on December 22, 1666, amassing a notable fortune.

Outside Italy, works by Guercino are dis-



The Burial of St. Petronilla, 1623, Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy.
Bottom, *Pope Gregory XV*, 1622-23, Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, USA



Bottom, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, 1618-22, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome, Italy



played in museums in Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, and Wales. In the United States his works can be admired at the Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art, Detroit Institute of Art, J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (not just his portrait of Pope Gregory XV), Indiana University Art Museum, Loyola University Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, National Gallery in Washington D.C., Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina, Allen Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Phoenix Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, Ringling Museum of Art in Florida, Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Timken Museum of Art in San Diego, Berkeley Art Museum, Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, Bob Jones University Museum and Gallery in Greenville, South Carolina, University of Iowa Museum of Art, Cincinnati Art Museum, Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, Worcester Art Museum, and the most-recently purchased (in 2010) from a private European collection of *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* (based on verses 5 to 42 of Chapter 4 in the Gospel According to St. John) at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. This painting has still to be published and was never exhibited publicly until last year.

From February 11 until April 2012, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England will host the exhibition, *Guercino: A Passion for Drawing: The Collections of Denis Mahon and the Ashmolean Museum*. The core of this exhibition comes from Mahon's personal collection.

His groundbreaking research on neglected Baroque artists in the 1930s and 1940s went hand in hand with buying paintings and drawings by the same unfashionable artists. He bought his first artwork, Guercino's *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph* in 1934 in Paris for £120. His drawings by Guercino came on loan to the Ashmolean in 1984, and 12 paintings from Mahon's magnificent collection have been on loan here since 1997. ○