



Self-portrait of Italian Baroque artist Guido Reni (1575-1642) in Rome's Palazzo Barberini

GUIDO RENI AND ROME: NATURE AND DEVOTION

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

On until May 22 at Rome's Borghese Gallery is a small temporary exhibition: "Guido Reni and Rome: Nature and Devotion," the first exhibition dedicated to Reni anywhere in the last 30 years. Like the artworks of the Borghese Gallery's several other temporary exhibitions on display since 2007, the present 30 works of art are displayed interspersed among the Gallery's permanent masterpieces: sculptures by Canova and Bernini and paintings by Titian, Cranach, Domenichino and Caravaggio. Sixteen of the 30 are paintings by **Guido Reni**. Best known for his mythological, allegorical and religious subjects, Reni was born in Bologna in 1575. After a financial squabble in 1601 he left Bologna for Rome, where he lived until 1614.

The exhibition's other fourteen works of art are by the Flemish landscapist **Paul Brill**, who introduced Reni to landscape painting and became his mentor in Rome, and other colleagues Nicolò dell'Abate, Agostino Carracci, Carlo Saraceni, Francesco Albani, and "Domenichino," like Reni all natives of Bologna or nearby (except Saraceni).

The exhibition's itinerary starts on the ground floor, in the large entrance way, with four monumental altarpieces, all painted by Reni in Rome, *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (1604-5), on loan from the Vatican Museums; the *Trinity with*



Here, Reni's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* from the Vatican Museums. Below, left, Michelangelo's fresco of St. Peter's crucifixion in the Pauline Chapel at the Vatican and, below right, Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter*

the Madonna of Loreto and the Patron, Cardinal Antonio Gallo (1603-4), on loan from the parish *Santissima Trinità* in Osimo near Ancona in the Marche; *The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (c. 1606), on loan from the diocesan museum in Albegna near Savona; and the *Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia* (1601), on loan from her namesake church in Trastevere. Besides Cardinal Gallo portrayed with the *Madonna of Loreto*, Reni's other early patrons in Rome were Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrati, banker and art collector Ottavio Costa, and Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini. Then, from 1604 to 1614, when Reni returned to Bologna more or less permanently, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of Pope Paul V, already the

patron of Bernini and Caravaggio, and the founder of the Borghese Gallery for his extensive personal art collection, commissioned works from Reni: the not-to-be-missed frescoes of the Chapel of the Annunciation in the Quirinal Palace (1609-10) and the fresco of *Aurora* in the

Casino (garden house) dell'Aurora Pallavicini Rospigliosi (1613-14). Usually closed, these magnificent frescoes will be open to the public for the duration of the exhibition. The chapel is open on Fridays and Saturdays; for the Casino's hours visit www.casinoaurora-pallavicini.it.

Speaking of Caravaggio, an acquaintance of Reni while they were both in Rome, Reni's



Crucifixion of St. Peter, painted for the *Abbazia delle Tre Fontane*, first built in the 7th century on the site where St. Paul was decapitated and today the only Trappist monastery in Rome, clearly shows the influence of Caravaggio's painting (1601) of the same subject in the Cerasi Chapel in *Santa Maria del Popolo* in *Piazza del Popolo*. Not to omit that Caravaggio had undoubtedly been influenced himself by Michelangelo's fresco of St. Peter's crucifixion (1545-50) in the Pauline Chapel in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. This is the first time Reni's canvas has left the Vatican Museums since it was returned there from Paris in 1816 by Canova, after having been looted by Napoleon in 1797.

In the adjacent rooms, the paintings also mostly depict religious subjects: *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1611), on loan from Bologna's National Picture Gallery, and *Saint Paul Reproaches the Penitent Saint Peter* (c. 1609), on loan from Milan's Brera Picture Gallery. Like the paintings in the entrance way, these too show a strong influence of ancient Roman sculpture as well as that of Bernini's statues for their bodies' twisted and ever-in-motion positions and the three-dimensional concreteness of their gestures, not to mention that their facial expressions are similar to those of Caravaggio's subjects.

Other Reni canvases on the Gallery's ground floor include: *The Standard of the Confraternity of the Sacred Stigmata* (1610-1612), on loan from the *Museo di Roma* near *Piazza Navona*; *Lot and His Daughters* on loan from London's National Gallery, and *David with the Head of Goliath*, on loan from the *Uffizi*. Reni painted the latter two after his return to Bologna, as he did *Atalanta and Hippomenes*, on loan from the *Capodimonte Museum* in Naples, the only Reni can-



The Massacre of the Innocents, on loan from Bologna's National Picture Gallery. Below, *Atalanta and Hippomenes* from the *Capodimonte Museum* in Naples. Bottom, *Country Dance*, property of the *Borghese Gallery*



vas exhibited here with a mythological subject.

Paul Bril, born in Antwerp in 1554 into a family of painters, moved to Rome in 1574, so nearly 30 years before Reni. An engraver, a "cabinet painter," he painted frescoes, but most importantly was one of the first landscapists in Rome. Three and maybe four of his works, all of which have always belonged to the Borghese Gallery, are displayed on the second floor of the exhibition next to several small paintings by Reni. These, like Reni's works on the floor below, also depict religious subjects, but have landscapes as their backgrounds. Also on display here is Reni's only totally landscape painting, *The Country Dance*, the *raison-d'être* and centerpiece of the exhibition.

Reni painted *The Country Dance* between 1601-1602, though some sources date it to 1605. Carefully recorded in the inventories and descriptions of Scipione Borghese's collection from the beginning of the 17th century, it remained in the collection until the end of the 19th century, when it was probably sold. It reappeared at auction in London in 2008 with

its attribution to an anonymous Bolognese artist, but scholars immediately recognized it as a work by Reni formerly belonging to the Borghese Collection. After its exhibition during the TEFAF (The European Fine Art Fair) in March 2020 at Bologna's Fondantico Gallery, the Borghese Gallery purchased it, thus achieving the exceptional recovery of its long-lost painting and its definitive return to Italy. *Guido Reni and Rome: Nature and Devotion*, where the canvas is on display for the first time in over a century, is to celebrate its return.

We know that Scipione Borghese wanted to appoint Reni his court painter, so he probably owned many Reni canvases. Today the Gallery still owns only one

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other major work by Reni, although it's completely different in genre and subject: *Moses with the Tablets of the Law*, from the artist's mature period.

Wikipedia published a 42-page exhaustive (some 140 artworks), although probably incomplete, inventory of Reni's work in chronological order and divided into his frescoes and his paintings. It begins with his *Coronation of the Virgin with Four Saints* (1595-6) in Bologna's Picture Gallery and ends with *The Flagellation* (1640-42, the year Reni died), also in Bologna. The Louvre, in Paris, houses 20 of his paintings; the Prado, in Madrid, 18; and London's National Gallery, seven.

Of the 45 in Rome, besides their already mentioned locations, they are housed in the Capitoline Museums, Palazzo Barberini's National Gallery of Ancient Art, the Spada Gallery, the Doria Pamphili Gallery, The Academy of St. Luke, *Palazzo Corsini*, the Pallavicini Gallery, and the Churches of: *San Gregorio al Celio*, *Santa Maria Maggiore*, *Santa Trinità dei Pellegrini*, *San Carlo ai Cati-*



Fresco of the Virgin sewing in the Quirinal Palace's Annunciation Chapel

nari, *San Luigi dei Francesi*, *Santa Maria in Vallicella*, and *San Lorenzo in Lucina*. Of the 29 in Bologna, 15 are in the National Picture Gallery.

In the USA they are housed in Sarasota's Ringling Museum, The Metropolitan, Providence's Rhode Island School of Design's Art Museum, Los Angeles' Museum of Art, Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence Kansas, Austin's Blanton Museum of Art, Princeton's Art Museum, Raleigh's North Carolina Museum of Art, Chicago's Art Institute, Cleveland's Museum of Art, Greenville's (South Carolina) Bob Jones University, and Detroit's Institute of Art.

To end on an amusing note, Reni had a fondness for *trompe l'oeil*. For

examples, his fresco of *Aurora* on the ceiling of the Casino dell'Aurora is framed as if it should be a painting hanging on the wall. More amusing are the two life-sized (not visible to the participants in the painting but to the viewer) flies in the upper right-hand corner of the *Country Dance*.○