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GIOVANNI FRANCESCO BARBIERI,
called GUERCINO
(Cento 1591-1666 Bologna)

SAINT PETER IN PRISON
oil on canvas
97 x 72 cm; 34 1/4 x 28 x 3/8 in. (unframed)

Provenance

Don Sebastian Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza (1811-1875);
Confiscated (1835), deposited in the Museo de la Trinidad [MT 298];
Given to José Madrazo y Agundo (1781-1859);
By descent to his son, Pedro Madrazo y Kuntz (1816-1898);
Restituted to Sebastian Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza;
By descent to his son, Pedro de Alcántara de Borbón y Borbón, 1st Duke of Dúrcal (1862-1892)
His sale, Paris, Drouot, maître Escribe, 3 February 1890, lot 3;
Private collection, Brittany, 1956;
Sale, Rennes Enchères Bretagne, 12 February 2018, lot 21;
Private collection, USA.

Literature

Catalogue abrégé des tableaux exposés dans les salons de l'ancien asile de Pau appartenant aux héritiers de feu Mgr l'Infant don Sébastien de Bourbon et Bragançe, Pau 1876, not numbered.

Authorship confirmed by Nicholas Turner before its 2018 sale.

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Guercino's recently rediscovered *Saint Peter in Prison* represents the beginning of a moment of seminal stylistic change for the artist, following his return to Cento after his two-year Roman sojourn.

The painting depicts a scene from Acts of the Apostles in which Saint Peter has been placed in prison by King Herod. Peter peers through a barred window through which a clear and decided light streams into his barren cell. Looking up towards heaven as he energetically claps his characteristic key, Peter seems fully at peace with his imprisonment, knowing that his faith in Christ will set him free.

Guercino places the captive Saint Peter incredibly close to the picture frame, thus making the figure take up a large portion of the canvas. This choice, common in the artist's early oeuvre, gives his figures an air of monumentality and motion. That said, it is quite clear that this work belongs to the artist's post-Roman period; looking at the comparatively similar *Saint John the Baptist visited by Salome in Prison* or *Moses* (both pre-Roman, dated circa 1620 and 1618-19, respectively, Figs. 1-2) one can see that Saint Peter emerges more strongly from his surroundings, rather than being surrounded by a thin, luminous haze that marked Barbieri's early career.

Guercino's time in Rome has been understood as the catalyst of a transitional period in the artist's career, in which his figures slowly become more defined, his backgrounds brighter, and his compositions more construed.¹ This stylistic change crystalized in the following years and decades, leading his later works such as *Saint Peter Weeping Before the Virgin* (Fig. 3) to prefer a careful, cleaner composition instead of a large and emotional monumentality. The present work, belonging to the very beginning of this transitional period, still maintains all the emotional charge of the artist's pre-Roman work while showing off a more mature and decided style of painting.

¹ Luigi Salerno, *I dipinti del Guercino*, Rome 1988, p. 46.

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Saint Peter's imprisonment was a theme already explored by Guercino in Rome: his *Saint Peter Freed by an Angel*, produced around 1622 and now in the Prado (Fig. 4), depicts the Saint's miraculous liberation from captivity: the Apostle is almost startled by the angel who emphatically points to the window of Peter's cell, exhorting him to escape. This is in contrast with the introspective nature of the current work, which focusses not on the act of divine liberation, but rather Peter's introspection and faith.

Though little is known about the painting's earliest provenance, the work's canvas lining and chassis bear the collector's mark (Fig. 5) of Don Sebastian (Sebastião) Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza (1811-1875), Infante of Spain and Portugal. Due to the prince's involvement in the Carlist wars against the reigning liberal factions of the Spanish house of Bourbon, Sebastian was exiled and his property-- including this picture-- was confiscated and deposited in the newly created Museo de la Trinidad. The work quickly passed into the personal possessions of the Neoclassicist painter Pedro Madrazo y Kuntz (1816-1898), before being restituted to Don Sebastian following the restoration of his titles and return from exile.

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Fig. 1. Giovanni Battista Barbieri, called Guercino, *Saint John the Baptist visited by Salome in Prison*, 1620. Private collection.

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Fig. 2. Giovanni Battista Barbieri, called Guercino, *Moses*, 1618-19. Buckinghamshire, Waddesdon Manor at Windmill Hill.

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Fig. 3. Giovanni Battista Barbieri, called Guercino, *Saint Peter Weeping Before the Virgin*, 1647. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

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Fig. 4. Giovanni Battista Barbieri, called Guercino, *Saint Peter Freed by an Angel*, c. 1622. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

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Fig. 5. Collector's stamp of Don Sebastian (Sebastião) Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza (1811-1875) on the chassis and lining of the present painting.