

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri,  
called Il Guercino  
(Cento 1591 – 1666 Bologna)

*Rinaldo prevents Armida's  
suicide*

1664  
oil on canvas  
118 x 163.5 cm.;  
46 1/2 x 64 3/8 in.

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## Provenance

Commissioned by Count Odoccione (Uguccione) Pepoli, Bologna, 24 October 1664, for 100 *ducatoni*;  
By descent to his son, Odio Pepoli;  
Private collection, Milan;  
Private collection, USA.

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## Literature

B. Ghelfi & D. Mahon, *Il libro dei conti del Guercino: 1629 – 1666*, Bologna 1997, p. 197, no. 587;  
R. Morselli and A. Cera Stones, *Collezioni e quadrarie nella Bologna del Seicento: Inventari, 1640-1707*, Documents for the History of Collecting: Italian Inventories, III, Los Angeles 1998, pp. 382-3;  
V. Sgarbi, 'Guercino uno e due. Ritratto dell'artista da giovane 1613-1629', in D. Mahon, M. Pulini & V. Sgarbi (eds.), *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento nella pittura del Seicento*, exh. cat., Milan 2003, p. 54, reproduced on p. 42;  
M. Pulini in D. Mahon, M. Pulini & V. Sgarbi (eds.), *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento nella pittura del Seicento*, exh. cat., Milan 2003, p. 236;  
D. Benati, 'La crisi della "gran macchia": il Guercino di Bigongiari', in *La vertigine del labirinto. Giornate di studio su Piero Bigongiari*, conference proceedings, Chieti 2003;  
D. Benati, 'Rinaldo e Armida', in D. Benati (ed.), *Invito al collezionismo: quattro secoli di dipinti e disegni dal Cinquecento all'Ottocento*, exh. cat., Bologna 2005, cat. no. 8, pp. 30-33;  
P. Di Natale, 'Rinaldo impedisce il suicidio di Armida', in V. Sgarbi (ed.), *Di Cimabue a Morandi. Felsina Pittrice*, exh. cat., Bologna 2015, cat. no. 80, p. 244, reproduced on p. 245;

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

N. Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino: A Revised and Expanded Catalogue raisonné*, Rome 2017, p. 767, no. 455.II (as Guercino).

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Exhibited

Bologna, Fondantico, *Invito al collezionismo: quattro secoli di dipinti e disegni dal Cinquecento all'Ottocento*, 5 November – 23 December 2005;

Bologna, Palazzo Fava, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Pinacoteca Nazionale, *Di Cimabue a Morandi. Felsina Pittrice*, 14 February – 17 May 2015.

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# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



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# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

First identified in 2003, the present canvas, painted at the end of the artist's long career only two years before his death, is an important addition to Guercino's extant *oeuvre* and the culmination of a lifelong interest in stories taken from Tasso's great epic poem, *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Previously known through reference to the artist's account books, where described as 'the painting of Rinaldo and Armida' commissioned by Count Odoccione (Uguccione) Pepoli,<sup>1</sup> its attribution to Guercino was first suggested in 2003 by Denis Mahon, Vittorio Sgarbi and Daniele Benati in the catalogue of the important exhibition *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento nella pittura del Seicento*, held that year in Milan.<sup>2</sup> The recent cleaning of the picture had revealed its very high quality and this suggested to Mahon and his fellow Italian scholars that our painting was in fact a fully autograph work, at that time known only from the account books and a painting, then attributed to the artist's nephew Benedetto Gennari the Younger (1633 – 1715) in the Palazzo Montecitorio, Rome, which was then considered to be a copy of a lost picture by the artist himself.<sup>3</sup> This attribution of the present painting has been endorsed more recently by Nicholas Turner in his catalogue raisonné published in 2017, though Turner has argued, following the suggestion of Massimo Pullini, that the Palazzo Montecitorio painting - whose handling is broader and less resolved than that of the present painting - should be regarded as a trial version for our canvas.

Malvasia mentioned under the year 1664 that Guercino painted '*Diverse figure per li Signori Pepoli, e mezze figure, e puttini*' and this is corroborated by the records in the artist's account book. The present painting was probably the principal half-length canvas in this group for which Conte Pepoli (d. 1680) paid L500 (125 *scudi*), making it one of the Count's most expensive purchases among the smaller pictures in that year. The count, who was a member of the junior branch of the senatorial Bolognese Pepoli family, enjoyed considerable social status residing in a large palace in the Via Galliera, Bologna. His son and heir, Senator Odio Pepoli, was also an important late patron of Guercino and his studio. The present picture was recorded by title in the inventory of the 121 paintings belonging to Odio Pepoli.

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Other clues as to the painting's existence prior to its rediscovery include two preparatory drawings - one in Christchurch, Oxford, and the other, which is the closest to the composition of the present painting, in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (fig. 1) - and the painted version previously attributed to Benedetto Gennari from the Palazzo Monceterio. The existence of such copies attests to the contemporary popularity of this composition.

The painting depicts an episode from Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered), first published in 1581. The poem presents a fanciful version of the First Crusade, where Christian knights led by Godfrey of Bouillon overcame the Muslims in order to gain control of Jerusalem. Armida, a Saracen sorceress, was employed to prevent the Christians from completing their mission. She set out to murder Rinaldo, a Christian knight, but instead fell deeply in love with him. This episode in the story of the attempted murder of Rinaldo was popular with other contemporary artists such as Nicolas Poussin (1594 – 1665), who depicted Cupid holding back Armida's hand (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, fig. 2), signifying a conflict between love and warfare which runs throughout Tasso's poem and which has parallels with the love affair between Tancred, a Christian knight, and Erminia, a Saracen princess, in the same poem. Having fallen in love with Rinaldo, Armida carries him away on her chariot drawn by winged dragons, in a scene depicted by Guercino and Agostino Tassi (1580 – 1644) on the ceiling of the Palazzo Castaguti in Rome. Towards the end of the poem, when the pagans have lost their final battle, Armida attempts suicide – only to be stopped by Rinaldo, who had earlier promised to be her champion. This is the moment here depicted by Guercino: Rinaldo can be seen clutching at Armida's arm to prevent her from plunging an arrow into her exposed chest.

The subject of the attempted suicide of Armida was first depicted by Guercino in 1615-17, in one of the series of detached frescoes, now dispersed, which were painted to decorate the Casa Pannini, Cento. Most of these are now in the Pinacoteca di Cento. In the Sala di Venere, Guercino painted a series of scenes taken from the story of Rinaldo and Armida of which Rinaldo preventing Armida's suicide was the penultimate scene, preceded by *Armida Attempting to Kill Rinaldo in Battle* and followed by the last scene in the story, *Two embracing couples in a chariot led by dragons*, which tells the story's happy ending when

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Rinaldo promises to restore Armida to her lost throne and she converts to Christianity, becoming his handmaid. In 1636 Guercino again depicted the subject in a now lost half-length painting made for Giacomo Saluzzo, nephew of Cardinal Durazzo, and in 1657 he then returned to the subject in a dynamic late canvas: one of five paintings commissioned by the Marchese de Soncino, which was recently auctioned at Dorotheum in Vienna (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup>

Executed in 1664, just two years before Guercino's death, the painting offers us a rare opportunity to examine the artist's style at the peak of his maturity. Moments of precision are juxtaposed with looser brushstrokes: Rinaldo's gleaming armour contrasts with Armida's soft and delicate skin. When comparing this work with the aforementioned, earlier version of *Rinaldo prevents Armida's suicide* executed by Guercino seven years earlier in 1657 (see fig. 3), one can fully appreciate how his technique evolved in the final stages of his career. The brushwork is now looser and more Titianesque, and the details of the accessories less precisely defined. This is accompanied by a psychological tension and a sense of urgency as Rinaldo moves towards Armida out of the darkness, staying her arm and pulling it towards his heart as she seems to twist away from him, the pallor of her face echoing the "*pallor di morte*" (deathly pallor) described in Tasso's poem, providing a strong chromatic contrast and chiaroscuro, thus enhancing the emotional power of the picture. Here the struggle between love and death and the conflicted emotions of the two protagonists who are on opposing sides in war, both enemies and lovers, are masterfully realized in this powerfully dramatic work from the artist's final years.

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 1.** Guercino, *Rinaldo prevents Armida's suicide*. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



**Figure 2.** Nicolas Poussin, *Rinaldo and Armida*, c. 1628-30. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 3.** Guercino, Rinaldo prevents Armida's suicide, 1657. Dorotheum, Vienna,  
8<sup>th</sup> July 2021



# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> B. Ghelfi & D. Mahon, *Il libro dei conti del Guercino: 1629 – 1666*, Bologna 1997, p. 197, no. 587.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Mahon, M. Pulini & V. Sgarbi (eds.), *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento nella pittura del Seicento*, exh. cat., Milan 2003, p. 54, 236, reproduced on p. 42; D. Benati, 'La crisi della "gran macchia": il Guercino di Bigongiarì', in *La vertigine del labirinto. Giornate di studio su Piero Bigongiarì*, conference proceedings, Chieti 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Inv. 236

<sup>4</sup> Dorotheum, Vienna, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2021, lot 92. The picture was earlier sold at the Dorotheum in 2010, when it fetched €1,042,300.