

GIOVANNI FRANCESCO BARBIERI, known as GUERCINO

(1591-1666)

Leaning Nude Man (recto); Kneeling Man, Hands Tied Behind His Back (verso)

Black chalk heightened with white on light blue-grey paper
46 x 35.5cm

Provenance:

Private collection, France

Related works:

Recto with the *Burial and Assumption of Saint Petronilla* by Guercino, painted in 1623 for Saint Peter and now at the Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome;

Verso with the *Martyrdom of Saint James the Greater* by Guercino, painted in 1627 for the Cappella Prini in SS. Pietro and Prospero, Reggio Emilia; lost but known from the engraving by Giovanni Battista Pasqualini, Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale.

This fascinating double-sided sheet was recently identified as one of Guercino's earliest works by Nicholas Turner.

Our drawing thus belongs to the first phase of Guercino's activity; strong concordances in style bring it closer to the academies generally attributed to the first period before Guercino visited Rome in 1621 or just after. The physical type set up on the recto of our sheet is found in the *Reclining Nude seen from behind*, charcoal on beige paper, 35.2 x 46.8 cm, annotated in ink lower right R:C.A R.SM .C, watermark SESTO, Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale; or the *Seated male nude, torso seen from behind*, red chalk heightened with white on beige paper, 33.7 x 27.2 cm, inscription in pencil on the back « *Coreggio* », Inv. 2536, Dutch Institute, Custodia Foundation, Fritz Lugt collection, Paris.

The liveliness of the recto is reminiscent of two studies by Guercino in Windsor Castle. These drawings from the Royal Collection, with a comparable draughtsmanship, show the same handling « taken from life »: *Nude seated on the ground* (recto) and on the right, a *study of the lower back and buttocks of a woman*, and *lower left a pear* (verso), circa 1616-20, charcoal and black chalk on greyish-buff paper, 30.0 x 26.3 cm, RCIN 902415; and a *Reclining male Nude*, circa 1618-19, oiled charcoal, heightened with white, on buff paper, 38.5 x 57.6 cm, RCIN 991227.

Two principal observations regarding the recto of our drawing may be made: first, it is an academy sheet, and secondly, it reveals the obvious influence of Faccini (it can be considered the most important stylistic reference of this period). Study of the live model was a primary concern in the Carracci Academy in Bologna, and therefore also for Guercino, who later embraced this approach in his establishment of an *Accademia del Nudo* in the *Casa Fabri*. Nicholas Turner clarifies that the so-called « *reform of painting* » achieved by the Carracci in Bologna came about from their practice of basing figurative painting on the accurate observation of the human figure through drawing, both in its movement and its expression. One of Carracci's followers, Pietro Faccini (c. 1562-1602), to whom this drawing was formerly attributed, was especially fond of making large-scale nude studies from the male nude, in black chalk, as here, rather than in red chalk, the medium generally preferred by the Carracci themselves. He was also fond of indicating dark areas in heavily accented marks, indicating the mid-tones in more evenly handled patches of shading, which is also paralleled in the handling of our sheet.

Malvasia refers to Guercino's particular interest in Faccini's drawings, which were shown to him by Padre Antonio Mirandola, the first patron to discover the young artist. Guercino's pre-Roman period charcoal or black chalk drawing indeed shows the direct influence of Faccini's technique and style, particularly in their strong contrasts of light and shadow. This technique of oiled charcoal on tinted

paper was indeed favored by the contemporary and rival of the Carracci, whose drawings were admired by Guercino. The stickiness of the charcoal forbade fine detail and led to a breadth of form and heavy shading, perfectly suited to Guercino's rich early figurative style.

The use of black chalk, rather charcoal, associated with light touches of white chalk is also characteristic of certain early studies by Guercino. The oily and soft black chalk of the recto allows Guercino to draw in *chiaroscuro* in drawing and to render his academy of man with life and expressiveness. The artist demonstrates an ability to provide for the specific needs of religious iconography through observation from life using his academies. This ability to meet the specific needs of religious iconography through observation of reality produced compositions really understandable to those who contemplated his paintings in churches. While it is difficult to give precise dates for nude studies from the pre-Roman period since for the most part they were not intended to be preliminary to a finished work of art, they often reveal the artist experimenting with poses that he later used in his paintings.

The pose of the recto is almost consciously difficult, but elegant nonetheless, suggesting that it may have been made for itself. It could indeed have been conceived as an exercise rather than in relation to one of the figures of the composition of the altarpiece of the Prini chapel. As Nicholas Turner points out, Guercino used to make full-fledged life drawings in his early period, which served as examples for his students. These drawings were usually done in black chalk or oiled charcoal, sometimes combining the two, and sometimes heightened with white. They were invariably drawn on tinted paper, gray-blue (the type of paper used here), or buff. They were usually carefully finished, with great attention paid to the figure's musculature and the fall of light across the body.

The male nude in the recto study supports his body on a staff, while touching the ground with his left hand. Both his pose and the way the back of his head is turned towards the viewer recalls the pose of the young gravedigger in the central foreground of Guercino's large altarpiece of the *Burial and Assumption of Saint Petronilla*, painted in 1623 for Saint -Peter and now in the Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome. In the present drawing, Guercino probably recycled the pose of this figure, with modifications, in order to explore, for the benefit of his students, the difficult foreshortening presenting by this daring position for the model.

The attribution to Guercino of this double-sided drawing is confirmed by the study on the verso of a kneeling man, his hands tied behind his back, which is an early representation of this pose, probably from life, for the companion of Saint James in Guercino's lost altarpiece of the *Martyrdom of Saint James the Greater*, painted in 1627 for the Cappella Prini in SS. Pietro and Prospero, Reggio Emilia. The artist began the altarpiece while he was still working on his frescoes for the dome of the Cathedral of Plaisance. This lost altarpiece survives, in reverse, in an engraving by Giovanni Battista Pasqualini, dated 1628, in which the saint's companion, bearded and wearing a loin cloth, appears on the left, looking to the right. Guercino also struck this kneeling pose in another more accomplished black chalk drawing on buff paper from the National Pinacoteca in Bologna, but this time from a beardless nude model striking a pose much closer to her final painted equivalent . (inv. no. 3679; 42 x 27 cm. The delicate treatment of light and shade in the Bologna drawing is a good comparison with the treatment of the nude studied on the recto of our sheet.

Likewise, Nicholas Turner points out that the figure of the Saint's companion crops up in many variant poses: those in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle (D. Mahon and N. Turner, *The Drawings of Guercino in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, Cambridge*, 1989, pp. 24-25, nos. 46 and 47); the Teylers Museum, Haarlem (C. van Tuyll van Serooskerken, *Guercino (1591-1666): Drawings from Dutch Collections*, exhibition catalogue, pp. 66-67, n° 19); the Istituto Nazionale della Grafica, Rome (D. Mahon, *Guercino, Disegni*, exhibition catalogue, Bologna, 1968, no. 112); and the Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia (E. M. Zafran, *One Hundred Drawings in the Chrysler Museum at Norfolk*, exhibition catalogue, March to May 1979, p. 14, no. 16).

The artist's technical virtuosity and his ability to achieve extraordinary effects of strength and luminosity are striking in this double-sided sheet, which testifies to his creative and experimental draughtsmanship.

We are grateful to Mr Nicholas Turner, co-author with Carol Plazzota of Drawings by Guercino from British Collections, for confirming the attribution of our drawing and for writing an expert report (dated 23 July 2010).