



## Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (1591-1666)

by Richard G. Mann

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Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666), usually called Guercino, was one of the leading Italian painters of the seventeenth century. His nickname (literally, squinter) is supposed to have been devised by Marchese Enzo Bentivoglio, a prominent connoisseur and lifelong friend.

Guercino's earliest paintings are in an intensely dramatic Baroque style, but, by the mid-1620s, he had developed a classicizing manner. The transformation of his style was so profound that many commentators have noted that it would be difficult to believe that his early and late paintings were created by the same artist if they had not been so thoroughly documented. Nevertheless, all of Guercino's works reveal certain common qualities: psychologically profound facial expressions and gestures; rich, strong colors; and atmospheric handling of paint.

Art historians consistently have overlooked the intensely sensual treatment of the male figure, which also characterizes paintings from all phases of Guercino's career. However, the fact that Guercino has been included in many recent lists of prominent queer figures of earlier historical periods suggests that many modern gay viewers have recognized the homoerotic appeal of his work.

This intuitive response is validated by a careful analysis of his paintings. Guercino fused spirituality and homoerotic desire in many of his paintings of religious subjects. Although Guercino's professional career is much more thoroughly documented than that of virtually any other seventeenth-century European painter, little about his personal life is known with certainty, except for the fact that he never married. However, "reading between the lines" of contemporary biographical accounts, we gain glimpses of an alternative lifestyle, which support conjectures inspired by the homoerotic appeal of his work.

Guercino was born February 2, 1591 in Cento, a small town in the Italian region of Emilia, located about halfway between Bologna and Ferrara. Because there were no major painters active in Cento during Guercino's childhood and adolescence, he received formal instruction only in the technical aspects of his art; and he essentially taught himself how to paint through his independent study of major art works in the nearby cities of Bologna, Ferrara, and Modena.

Among contemporary artists, he seems to have most carefully examined the works of the Bolognese artist Ludovico Carracci (1555-1619), who created dynamic altarpieces in a proto-Baroque style. Ludovico identified Guercino as one of his most successful followers, even though he did not study with him.

However, Guercino seems to have been influenced most strongly by the earlier sixteenth-century artist Correggio (Antonio Allegri, about 1494-1534), whose paintings were widely dispersed throughout Emilia. In the context of a queer interpretation of Guercino, it is interesting to note that Correggio boldly transgressed restrictive gender and sexual conventions in his work and that his male figures are strongly homoerotic.



Two paintings by Guercino:  
**Top:** *The Ecstasy of Saint Francis*.  
**Above:** *David with the Head of Goliath* (ca 1650).

From Correggio, Guercino seems to have borrowed fluid handling of paint; rich, saturated colors; misty, atmospheric effects; and strong contrasts of light and shadow, among other features. Furthermore, Guercino seems to have imitated Correggio's exquisitely beautiful, androgynous male figures, as well as his interpretation of martyrdom as an ecstatic experience. In these respects, one can compare Guercino's *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (1622, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest) with Correggio's *Christ Presented to the People* (about 1515, National Gallery, London).

In 1613, Padre Antono Mirandola, a prominent ecclesiastic and another lifelong friend, helped Guercino to secure his first major commission, the main altarpiece, depicting the *Glorification of All Saints* (now lost), for the church of Santo Spirito, Cento. Shortly thereafter, he decorated two private residences in Cento-- Casa Provenzale (1614) and Casa Pannini (1615)--with frescoes of sensual nude male figures, holding attributes of various characters from classical mythology.

In 1615, Guercino opened an academy for drawing, organized in accord with the most advanced current ideas about the education of artists. Dissatisfied with this undertaking, he shut down the academy two years later, although it was financially successful.

Thereafter, Guercino organized his studio in accord with medieval and earlier Renaissance traditions. Most artists of the Baroque era made substantial income from students, who not only paid fees but also provided free labor. Although much sought as a teacher, Guercino preferred to maintain a "closed" workshop and to avoid the sort of frequent changes of personnel common in artistic practices that depended upon student workers.

Guercino and his assistants (who included two nephews) lived together in a large house in Cento, and, according to contemporary accounts, they formed a cohesive, tightly knit community. It is tempting to speculate that this household constituted an extended protogay family, but we have no information about the daily life of Guercino and his assistants. Whatever the dynamics of their association, Guercino's respect for his assistants is revealed by the fact that, in opposition to usual practice at the time, he did not appropriate any income that they earned from executing works independently.

In 1617, Guercino invented the theme of *Saint Sebastian Tended by Two Angels* in an exquisite painting on copper (Sudeley Castle, Gloucestershire). In this small picture, he shows the wounded Sebastian being consoled by two handsome, muscular angels, rather than the traditional figures of Saint Helen and her maid. The conflation of pain and rapture in Sebastian's expression may have been inspired by Correggio's *Martyrdom of Four Saints* (1524, Galleria Nazionale, Parma).

*Saint Sebastian Tended by Two Angels* is an innovative variation upon the theme of *Dead Christ Mourned by Two Angels*, which Guercino also painted in 1617 (now National Gallery, London). Although glowing colors and sumptuous handling of paint make these images seem beautiful, it should be noted that both Sebastian and Christ are rugged individuals, represented in a naturalistic fashion.

Throughout his career, Guercino introduced angels (who were consistently represented as male figures in this era), even when their presence was not justified by existing accounts or the usual iconography. For instance, in *Saint Gregory the Great with Saints Ignatius and Francis Xavier* (about 1626, National Gallery, London, on extended loan from Sir Denis Mahon), Guercino depicted Gregory, gazing at a beautiful, full length angel standing alongside his throne. As if realizing Gregory's desire, two putti embrace playfully in the heavens above him; one of the putti, who has a notably erect penis, gazes seductively down at Gregory. Guercino visualized the *Vocation of Saint Luigi Gonzaga* (1650, Wrightsman Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) in allegorical terms, with the saint ecstatically looking towards a handsome angel.

Typical distinctions between Guercino's handling of male and female figures can be observed in his *Samson*

*Captured by the Philistines* (1619, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Although Baroque artists usually caricatured Delilah's ravenous sensuality and greed, Guercino has endowed her with dignity and restraint. However, he has infused Samson's figure with great sexual energy. Shimmering light sets off the straining muscles of this figure, who fills much of the picture surface.

In 1620, Guercino received (again with Mirandola's help) his most important commission to date: *Saint William Receiving the Monastic Habit* (now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna), a monumental altarpiece for the church of San Gregorio, Bologna. Through flickering effects of light and shade, boldly twisted poses, and other devices, he infused this scene with a sense of great dramatic power. As he would do in many later works, he enhanced the emotional mood by showing male figures (such as the prominent soldier and monk in the right foreground) gazing longingly at one another. Of course, one could assume that these figures are engaged in mutual contemplation of the spiritual significance of the event. Nevertheless, their interaction seems to have an erotic "edge" to it.

The altarpiece for San Gregorio attracted the attention of Cardinal Alessandro Ludovisi, Archbishop of Bologna, who called Guercino to Rome shortly after he was elected Pope on February 8, 1621, assuming the name Gregory XV.

In 1621, as a result of the new pope's commission, Guercino undertook *Aurora*, a fresco covering the ceiling of the Casino Ludovisi, a pavilion in the gardens of the Ludovisi family estate in Rome. This depiction of the goddess of the dawn, driving her chariot across the heavens, developed the possibilities of Baroque illusionism to a new extreme.

In a similarly bold and dynamic style, Guercino painted the *Saint Chrysogonus in Glory*, an oil painting originally inset on the ceiling of the church dedicated to that saint in Rome (1622, now Lancaster House, London). Although the Ludovisi sought to monopolize most of Guercino's creative energies, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, a strong promoter of an exuberant Baroque style, succeeded in obtaining Guercino's services for this project.

Chrysogonus is seen from below, as he is carried up to heaven by five putti. The saint gazes up ecstatically at two beautiful angels, who await him in heaven. As is the case with many of his other religious paintings, the presence of the angels is justified neither by accounts of the saint nor by pictorial tradition. A man who loved other men, Scipione Borghese undoubtedly would have appreciated Guercino's interpretation of this scene.

Pope Gregory entrusted Guercino with the decoration of the Loggia delle Benedizioni above the main entrance to Saint Peter's. This would have been an immense undertaking, but little had been done on the project before Gregory's untimely death on July 8, 1623.

However, before leaving Rome in the fall of 1623, Guercino finished a monumental altarpiece for Saint Peter's, *Burial and Reception in Heaven of Saint Petronilla* (Palazzo Capitolino i Pinacoteca, Rome, 723 x 423 cm.). Guercino spent two years working on this immense painting.

His numerous preparatory drawings for it reveal the transformation of his style while in Rome. The initial sketches suggest that Guercino planned a diagonal composition, filled with numerous dynamically twisted figures, illuminated sporadically with flickering light. However, the figures in the final painting do not "break out" from the picture surface, and the composition is largely organized in terms of horizontals and verticals. In addition, Guercino has developed a balanced distribution of light and shade, so that the contours of figures are clearly revealed. He also has moved away from his earlier naturalism and characterized figures in a more idealized way. Expressions and gestures are less theatrical than previously, but the emotions of the figures, nevertheless, are revealed eloquently.

The motivations for the notable shift in Guercino's style are uncertain. However, it seems likely that

Guercino--an artist who recently moved from a small provincial town to a major European cultural and intellectual center--may have been insecure about his artistic direction. Thus, he may have felt compelled to modify his style to accord with classicism, the predominant artistic trend at the time. Among the earliest and most vocal advocates of classicism was Monsignor Giovanni Battista Agucchi (1570-1632), an art theorist who lived in the Ludovisi household during Gregory's pontificate and who helped to shape the artistic taste of all members of the Pope's family. By changing his style, Guercino probably hoped to secure future papal commissions.

Agucchi was one of many classical theorists who, throughout the seventeenth century, strongly criticized certain aspects of Guercino's style--the supposed disorder of his compositions and, especially, the naturalism of his figures. Agucchi and other writers maintained that Guercino shared Caravaggio's fascination with deformed and "vile" nature.

The connections made between Guercino and Caravaggio and other "accusations" about Guercino's work are puzzling for a number of reasons. These negative comments about Guercino's work persist throughout his career, long after he had transformed his style in accord with classical principles. Furthermore, although the naturalism of his figures and the strong light and dark contrasts in his early paintings might recall Caravaggio to a casual viewer, the styles of these artists differed in many respects. For instance, Guercino's coloristic and atmospheric effects strongly differentiate even his early paintings from works by Caravaggio, who employed a limited range of colors and carefully defined forms.

It seems possible that classical theorists did not explicitly identify the factors that they found most troubling in Guercino's work. These writers may have been disconcerted by the fusion of spirituality and homoerotic desire, achieved by both Caravaggio and Guercino. In terms of the predominant morality of the era, same-sex desire certainly would have been regarded as a manifestation of deformed and vile nature. Significantly, however, despite the many changes that he made in his work, Guercino never modified this fundamental aspect of his art.

Although they did not explicitly mention same-sex desire, at least some seventeenth-century viewers did indicate that they were disturbed by the physicality and eroticism of Guercino's depictions of Christ and male saints. In his account of Guercino's life (1678), Carlo Cesari Malvasia, a generally reliable historian, claimed that Pope Innocent X (reigned 1644-55) was deeply troubled by one of Guercino's paintings of Christ, which he described as "too nude." After unsuccessfully trying to persuade other artists to paint over the figure, the Pope is supposed to have ordered the image destroyed because of its moral decadence. Even if this story is apocryphal, it does suggest the dilemma that Guercino's paintings posed for some viewers.

Published comments by Guercino's supporters also suggest their need to counter accusations of "deviance," though they never acknowledged such charges. While pointing out the notable transformation of his style, his advocates dwelled at greater length on his moral purity. Why would such defense of personal behavior be necessary if his life were assumed to be exemplary?

From remarks that he made later in his life to Malvasia and other biographers, it is clear that Guercino was offended by the diatribes published against his work. Moreover, in Rome, he also felt pressured to conform to uncongenial dominant styles. Thus, it is not surprising that he returned to his native Cento almost immediately after the death of Gregory XV.

However, Guercino continued to attract the attention of such major patrons as Marie de' Medicis, Queen Mother of France, and Charles I, King of England, who both tried to lure him to their courts with promises of substantial salaries and other inducements. Although he refused these offers, Guercino enjoyed great financial success as he executed numerous commissions for prominent individuals throughout Europe. The esteem in which he was held by other artists is suggested by the visit made to his studio in 1629 by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (1599-1666).

Shortly after the death of Guido Reni on August 18, 1642, Guercino and his assistants moved to Bologna, the leading cultural center of Emilia, and they there received the types of major religious commissions that Reni had monopolized up to that point. Apparently, Guercino was willing to establish his practice in a major center, as long as he did not have to endure the sort of competition that troubled him in Rome. In 1655, Christina, Queen of Sweden, made a special trip to Bologna in order to pay her respects to Guercino.

During his later years, Guercino was troubled by various medical problems, which reduced his output. However, he remained active as an artist until his death on December 22, 1666 in Bologna.

In his later years, Guercino continued to infuse significant religious subjects with homoerotic feeling, as he did, for example, in the monumental *Flagellation of Christ* (1658, Galleria Corsini, Rome), commissioned by Cardinal Lorenzo Imperiali, then cardinal legate of Ferrara. Holding a whip loosely by his side, Christ's tormenter gently lifts up some of his hair as he gazes intently at him with an expression encompassing both compassion and desire.

The sensitivity and beauty of the radiant figure of Christ was praised lavishly by eighteenth-century travelers, who saw this picture in the public galleries of the Palazzo Chigi in Rome. However, John Ruskin (1819-1900), a preeminent Victorian critic, condemned the supposed moral decadence of this and other religious subjects by Guercino. Thus far, modern art historians have chosen to remain silent about the aspects of Guercino's work that disturbed Ruskin. But the homoerotic power of his paintings must be acknowledged if his artistic achievements are to be fully understood.

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