

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

The youngest of the Early Baroque painters of the Bolognese school, Guercino pursued the most individual path amongst them. Apprenticed in 1607 to Benedetto Gennari, he claimed to have learnt most from two altarpieces by Lodovico Carracci in Cento and Bologna. In 1617 he arrived in Bologna to paint a number of works for Cardinal Alessandro Ludovisi. After visits to Venice and Ferrara in 1618 and 1619, Guercino painted the masterpiece of his maturity, The Investiture of St. William of Aquitaine, for S. Gregorio, Bologna, in 1620. Summoned to Rome on Cardinal Alessandro's election as Pope Gregory XV in 1621, Guercino's first commission was to paint the Aurora and other works in the Casino Ludovisi. In 1622-3 he painted the vast altarpiece of St. Petronilla for St. Peter's in which, under the influence of the theories of Monsignor Agucchi, he began to forsake the flickering, painterly chiaroscuro of his earlier works, for a more lucid style in which light is used to emphasize rather than dissolve the contours and solidity of figures. With the death of Gregory XV in 1623, Guercino moved back to Cento, only transferring to Bologna to assume the mantle of Guido Reni on the latter's death in 1642. These years continued to produce a steady evolution in Guercino's style, as he gradually assimilated, first the lessons of Rome, and then the paler classicizing manner of Reni's last years, reconciling these with his own taste for saturated colour and increasingly delicate handling.

Absalom ordering the assassination of Amnon

Oil on canvas

126 x 161 cm

This picture, which was previously unknown, is in all probability that recorded by Malvasia as having been painted by Guercino in 1628 for Lorenzo Fioravanti, an active patron of his at the time (cf. Felsina Pittrice, 1841 edn., vol. II, p. 261). The picture was still in the Casa Fioravanti at the end of the 18th century, but subsequently disappeared. Its composition, however, has been known from a copy (showing it in its untrimmed state) discovered by Denis Mahon in the reserves of the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna (inv. no. 932, 139 x 176 cm.) and from another version lacking a substantial strip at the bottom of the composition, which was in the collection of Jacques Combe in Paris before the last War, and which re-emerged at a Christie's sale in Rome (9th June 1975, lot 147, bought in), in such a condition as to make a definite judgement upon its authorship difficult.

Denis Mahon, having studied the present painting, considers it probable - on account of its superiority to the other known versions - that it is the prime original, although, because of the conservation cleaning which is all that it has been possible to undertake so far, some elements of the composition do not come through with complete clarity.

The subject of this painting was a novel one because, though taken from the Bible (II Samuel xiii, 28-29), it had no doctrinal significance, Absalom and Amnon were half-brothers, both sons of King David. Amnon had feigned illness in order to induce Absalom's sister Tamar to feed him in bed, and then raped her, only to reject her violently afterwards. Absalom waited two years to take the revenge shown here. A number of preparatory studies testify to Guercino's concern to find a dramatically effective way of conveying the scene (cf. Il Guercino: Disegni, exh. cat. Bologna, Archiginnasio, 1968, nos. 116-119, and the discussion of them by Denis Mahon under no. 119). The earlier drawings present the event almost as a genre episode, just showing the two bravi

setting on Amnon; it is only in the last drawing of the series, at Windsor (inv. no. 2398) that Guercino introduces Absalom, tellingly contrasting his still instigation with the violence of the deed. In this drawing he is shown on the opposite side of the table to the spectator, his eyes fixed on Amnon, but recoiling slightly from the struggle. A red chalk drawing in the Brera evolved the solution finally adopted - that of Absalom rising from his seat at the end of the table to order the murder.

This composition in turn inspired the paintings by Preti in the Museo di Capodimonte and the National Gallery, Canada, and another by Cavallino in the Harrach collection.

Hist.: Lorenzo Fioravanti, Bologna

Exh.: Heim Gallery, Summer 1978, no.