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To whom it may concern,

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called il Guercino (1591–1666)

Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist (c. 1615–16) (**Fig. 1**)

Oil on canvas; diam.: 78/80 cm

The Covid.19 pandemic prevented me from examining the picture in the original, so this report is instead based on good, high-resolution images of it.

The newly discovered painting:

The figure group of the *Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist*—not the landscape nor the roundel format—was previously known from Guercino's two upright oil sketches of the subject painted in brown monochrome (**Figs. 2 and 3**), one in the Galleria Pallavicini, Rome,¹ and the other in the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation (now on deposit at the Museum of Fine Arts), Houston.² The newly-discovered picture represents the hitherto lost final stage in the evolution of the composition, which went through many stages. Besides the two monochrome sketches, five preparatory drawings have also survived, which shed interesting light on the early stages of the compositional process. Since these works have been dated c. 1615–16, this must also be the date of the present picture. The identity of the patron for whom the roundel was commissioned remains unknown, though he was probably a resident of Guercino's native Cento, or a town close by.

The newly discovered painting's circular format is apparently unique in the work of Guercino's early career. Circular paintings, or *tondi*, representing the Holy Family in a landscape setting were popular in the Renaissance period, with examples by Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Strikingly different from these antecedents is the sombre, almost 'Caravaggesque' lighting, as well as the greater intimacy between the figures. While the background of open country with occasional trees provides some suggestion of space, the figures are pressed tightly against the foreground plane, as if in shallow relief. Their modelling in ochres, burnt umbers and other warm browns also hints at terracotta. Providing a foil to the prevailing warm monochrome tints are the burgundy of the Virgin's chemise and the deep lapis lazuli blue of her cloak, a colour repeated in a lighter hue in the sky. The picture was painted on the threshold of Guercino's outstanding career.

Guercino was relatively new to oil painting at the outset of his career. In 1616, when he painted the present picture, he was still in his mid-twenties. His inexperience may be partly explained by the fact that the great majority of his earliest work is large-scale mural decorations executed in water soluble tempera—not oil paint. So successful was he as an interior decorator that many large private residences in Cento contain fresco cycles by him. As a painter in both tempera and oil, Guercino was self-taught, preferring to learn for himself how to paint as he worked on commissions in his native town, rather than undertaking formal training with an established painter away from home. The *Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist* therefore belongs to a select group of oil paintings made c. 1615, when he was mostly working in another medium. In the following six-years, from 1615 to 1621, when he departed for Rome, he created a remarkable sequence of oil paintings in rapid succession, culminating in his great altarpiece of *St William Receiving the Monastic Habit*, painted in 1620 for S. Gregorio, Bologna, and now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.³

Guercino's preparatory drawings for the picture:

The five surviving preparatory drawings allow Guercino's thoughts on the evolution of the composition to be followed in detail. The earliest is a study in the Print Room at Windsor Castle, showing the Virgin watching over the two children as they are about to embrace (**Fig. 4**).⁴ The emotional reunion between the two cousins was occasioned by the Christ Child's return to Galilee from Egypt. As the Christ Child advances to greet St John, he turns his back towards the viewer in a pose that anticipates, in reverse, that of the seated St John the Baptist in the present picture.

The central action and the arrangement of the figures were altered in two later studies, both square in format. One is in the Albertina, Vienna (**Fig. 5**),⁵ and the

other in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (**Fig. 6**).⁶ In both drawings, the Virgin appears to one side, her head in profile, with only part of her body seen, but also in both the Christ Child is now seated on his mother's forearm, his back to the viewer, with St John Baptist kneeling in front of him, nearly full face. In the Vienna drawing, the Infant Baptist kneels before the Christ Child and presents him with a goldfinch, symbol of Christ's death on the Cross, while the Amsterdam drawing roughly repeats this arrangement of the children but shows them in closer proximity. The reason for the greater intimacy is that St John is kissing the back of one of Christ's hands. This is the first time the motif makes its appearance and is the same as the one later employed in the painting (see **Fig. 9** below). The gesture is similarly a prolepsis for the Crucifixion, as it alludes to the nails with which Christ was fixed to the Cross.

A finished compositional drawing, formerly with Bonham's, London, marks a later stage in the progress of Guercino's design (**Fig. 7**).⁷ Unlike his other rapidly drawn studies, the ex-Bonham's sheet is a carefully worked up *modello*, perhaps for presentation to the patron. The shifting of the Virgin to the centre of the composition, where she is seated full face behind the two infants, marks an important change to the design. The three figures coalesce into a single 'sculptural' group, the infants in the foreground, as the primary focus, and the benign figure of the Virgin forming a neutral backdrop as she keeps charge of them. When reversed (**Fig. 8**), the ex-Bonham's drawing anticipates in many respects the grouping of the figures in the newly discovered painting.

Despite this significant step, Guercino had not yet fully resolved how to treat the intimate rapport between the two infants. The ex-Bonham's drawing shows the artist trying out yet another option. The Christ Child stands on a block, at a higher level than St John, and is about to take the scroll offered to him by his cousin, inscribed: *ECCE [AGNUS DEI]* ('Behold the Lamb of God'). The scroll alludes to Christ as the Lamb of God and the saviour of mankind. The excited movements of the two children over the symbolic gift recalls their emotional reunion represented in the Windsor drawing (see **Fig. 4**). However, Guercino eventually dispensed with the Infant Baptist's scroll and reed-cross and returned to the spontaneous, uncluttered gesture of the Infant Baptist kissing the Christ Child's hands first adumbrated in the Amsterdam drawing.

The arched top of the ex-Bonham's drawing may provide evidence that Guercino was considering a circular composition, since the shape was almost certainly cut at the initiative of Guercino himself rather than a later collector, who must have blunted the arc at its summit. The drawing, however, is rectangular, and in this respect anticipates the proportions of the Rome and Houston oil sketches, both of which would have been made soon after. The patron may have been invited to consider two options for the picture's eventual

shape: a roundel, as indicated by the top of the drawing, or an upright rectangle, as indicated by the emphatically squared stepped parapet at the bottom, which allowed the two infants to be placed at different heights.

Two oil sketches for the figures in monochrome:

Guercino painted the two upright oil sketches with no colour and no landscape background, but with what may be a possible hint at the eventual circular form (see **Figs. 2 and 3**). What appears to be a tiny segment of a circle appears in the lower left corner of the Rome painting, and this may indicate that a circular picture had been decided upon. In all three works, the scale of the figures is apparently the same, making it likely that the figures in successive renditions were traced, with variations, from the previous one. The Rome monochrome is the more experimental of the two sketches and is significantly darker and less worked than the one in Houston. The Houston sketch seems to have immediately preceded the present canvas. Guercino would have used such expensive coloured pigments as lapis lazuli only for a finished commission.

Eye-catching figural poses in the early paintings

As an up-and-coming painter, Guercino flaunted his exceptional talent. The brilliance of his brushwork was greatly admired by his public, but he also caught their attention by including daringly posed figures in his pictures. These poses were both inventive and naturalistic. They were so novel in conception that few contemporary painters would have risked trying out similarly unusual figures. With their pudgy infant flesh, large heads, small hands and feet, the Christ Child and the Infant Baptist would have been the most challenging figures to paint in the present canvas. Seated opposite each other, at an angle to the picture plane, they take each other's hands in a gesture that is the composition's focus (**Fig. 9**). The representation of the Infant St John the Baptist's ample expanse of bare back, mostly in highlight, was also a bold step. Close to the viewer's space, his body is 'impolitely' turned away from the viewer to show a discreet glimpse of his posterior. In 1616, Guercino opened his *Accademia del nudo*, in the house of a Centese patron, where he taught his pupils life drawing. The date coincides with that of the picture under discussion, and his new commitment to life drawing may further explain his desire to undertake an anatomical challenge that the figures of the two children presented.

Many of Guercino's distinctive poses of the figure are sometimes seen *in nuce* in his earlier work and variants of them are sometimes recycled in later paintings. The prototype for the Infant St John in the present picture is the seated Christ Child in his *Holy Family* in the Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, also datable *c.* 1615–16 (**Fig. 10**).⁸ Four years later, the figure of the Infant Baptist was brilliantly transformed into a winged angel sitting beside God

the Father in Guercino's *God the Father with a Winged Angel Supporting a Globe*, known from two autograph versions, one in a private collection—here reproduced (**Fig. 11**)⁹—and the other in the Galleria Palazzo Rosso, Genoa.¹⁰ The picture was intended as the *sopraquadro* for the painter's famous early altarpiece of *St William Receiving the Monastic Habit*.¹¹

In the *sopraquadro* composition, the angel is seated to the left of the composition and holds a globe, while gazing in awe at the Almighty. Like the Infant Baptist, his body is turned slightly into the picture space so that his naked back catches the light, but at the same time the side of his face is in deep shadow. An x-ray of the private collection sketch version of that work (**Fig. 12**) shows that Guercino's first idea for the child's face was to give him an emphatically *profil perdu*, so that his plump right cheek conceals his nose as he turns his head. The painter thought better of taking this licence and decided to add the button nose seen in the finished design. This bold first idea of concealing prominent facial features to enhance the sense of the child turning away recalls the head of the Infant St John the Baptist in the present roundel, whose only discernible features besides his right cheek, and a trace of his nose, are his eyelashes.

There is another motif in the *Virgin and Child with the Infant St John the Baptist* that Guercino would re-use. The Virgin, with her head slightly cocked, looks benignly over the shoulder of her son, while he turns his back to her to engage in affectionate discourse with his cousin. In a similar juxtaposition in another picture, the Virgin looks smilingly over her son's shoulder as they appear in the sky in the altarpiece of the *Virgin and Child with Sts Joseph, Augustine, Louis and Francis with a Young Donor*, painted in 1616, now in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels (**Fig. 13**).¹² Guercino went on to employ the same motif in a lost painting of *The Virgin Teaching the Christ Child to Read (Mater Sapientiae)*, datable *c.* 1616, known from a reversed copy in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Fondation Corboud, Cologne, where the Virgin looks on tenderly as the Christ Child reads from a large book (**Fig. 14**).¹³ If the Cologne composition is flipped (**Fig. 15**), the juxtaposition of the heads of the Virgin and Child is nearly the same as in the Brussels altarpiece.

Some of the excitement caused by the reappearance of a lost picture by an important master is the straightforward pleasure of discovery and the enrichment of an already distinguished *oeuvre* by a 'new' addition. Such finds also allow new relationships to be established with paintings and drawings by the master that were already known. As here, new light is sometimes cast on the

artist's creative process and with it a greater depth of understanding of the master's work.

¹ Inv. no. 15; oil on canvas; 77.4 x 60.4 cm. See D. Mahon, "Notes on the Young Guercino, II: Cento and Ferrara," *Burlington Magazine*, 70, no. 409, 1937, pp. 176–89 (esp. p. 189, n. 38 [as copy]); F. Zeri, *La Galleria Pallavicini in Roma: Catalogo dei dipinti*, Florence, 1959, no. 14 (as after Guercino, following Mahon); L. Salerno, *I dipinti del Guercino*, Rome, 1988, p. 99, under no. 21 (as copy); and N. Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino: A Revised and Expanded Catalogue raisonné*, Rome, 2017, no. 22.I, repr. (as autograph).

² Inv. no. BF.1983.2; oil on canvas; 74.9 x 58.4 cm. See Salerno 1988, no. 21, repr. (as autograph); and Turner 2017, no. 22.II, repr. (as autograph). Two copies of the Houston painting are in English collections and follow its slightly smaller dimensions (as compared with the Rome canvas). One is in the British Royal Collection at Hampton Court (inv. no. 117; oil on canvas; 72.4 x 59.4 cm; see M. Levey, *The Later Italian Pictures in the Royal Collection*, London, 1964, no. 522 [as after Guercino]). This was traditionally given to Guercino, but subsequently to Carlo Cignani (1628–1719). The other copy is in the Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford (Guise Bequest, 1765; oil on canvas; 73.8 x 38.3 cm; see J. Byam Shaw, *Paintings by Old Masters at Christ Church, Oxford*, Oxford, 1967, no. 207). The Oxford picture is a crude, much repainted replica of that at Hampton Court.

³ Inv. no. 478; oil on canvas; 348.5 x 231 cm. See Salerno 1988, no. 69, repr.; and Turner 2017, no. 91, repr. The painting was first commissioned for the Locatelli Chapel in S. Gregorio, Bologna.

⁴ Inv. no. RCIN 902554; pen and brown ink; 155 x 132 mm. See D. Mahon and N. Turner, *The Drawings of Guercino in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, Cambridge, 1989, no. 143, repr.; and Turner 2017, under no. 22.I.

⁵ Inv. no. 2317; pen and brown ink, with grey wash, over black and red chalk; 145 x 143 mm. See V. Birke and J. Kertész, *Die Italienischen Zeichnungen der Albertina. Generalverzeichnis, Band II*, Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 1994, p. 1212, repr.

⁶ Inv. no. RP-T-1948-135; pen and brown ink, with brown wash; 120 x 127 mm. See L. Frerichs, *Italiaanse Tekeningen I, de 17^{de} Eeuw*, exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 1973, no. 69, repr.

⁷ Pen and brown ink, with brown wash; 171 x 125 mm. See sale, London, Bonham's, 23 April 2008, lot 240, repr. (in colour).

⁸ Inv. no. 132; oil on canvas; 56.5 x 75 cm. See Salerno 1988, no. 17, repr.; and Turner 2017, no. 21, repr.

⁹ Oil on canvas; 67 x 91.7 cm. See Turner 2017, no. 94.I, repr.

¹⁰ Inv. no. 257; oil on canvas; 66 x 71 cm. See Salerno 1988, no. 70, repr.; and Turner 2017, no. 94.II, repr.

¹¹ See Note 3.

¹² Inv. no. 198; oil on canvas; 309 x 192 cm. See Salerno 1988, no. 27, repr.; and Turner 2017, no. 31, repr.

¹³ Inv. no. WRM 3389; oil on canvas; 71.5 x 58 cm. See Salerno 1988, no. 360 (as lost work, with the related print); and Turner 2017, no. 33, repr. (as by or after Guercino).