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On Light and Perspective in Paintings Shown at the Exhibition *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque. Masterpieces from Cento, Rome and Polish Collections*

The presentation of as many as thirty-two paintings by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Guercino,[1] is an extraordinary event in Polish museology. However, a concurrent exhibition of Baroque Italian painting held at the same time in Budapest gathered 142 works from around the world[2] (including three by Guercino), which provides an apt illustration of the different level of support for culture in both countries. The Warsaw exhibition featured paintings, mostly from Guercino's early period, as well as drawings and prints. Good illumination and the possibility of convenient and very close contact with the original works enabled viewers to admire the painting technique, light and shade effects and colour palette, as well as associate the perspective of compositions with their actual size, which is difficult to determine based on reproductions.

Numerous works on display are adorned with luminous reflections in a dark sky. They can also be admired in wall paintings – ill-adapted to such solutions – represented at the exhibition by Guercino's youthful landscapes from Casa Pannini in Cento executed c. 1615–16.[3] This effect, enhanced by the possibilities of the oil technique, appears at the same time, e.g., in *Landscape with a Knight* (*Rinaldo Corradino Riding a Mule*) (c. 1615–16).[4] Here, though, like in many other contemporary and later works – such as *Erminia Finding the Wounded Tancred*, brought to

[1] I cite this figure based on the numbering adopted in the exhibition catalogue *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque. Masterpieces from Cento, Rome and Polish Collections*, Justyna Guze, Joanna Kilian, Joanna Sikorska, academic eds, exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 2013–14 (Warsaw, 2013). In the catalogue, nine fragments of decorations from Bartolomeo Pannini's house in Cento (cat. nos I.5–13) were listed separately, while *The Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary* from Cento (cat. no. I.18) was presented as a single work. Seventeen of the paintings that were brought to Warsaw had previously been shown at the exhibition at Palazzo Barberini in Rome: *Guercino 1591–1666. Capolavori da Cento e da Roma (Roma Palazzo Barberini 16 settembre 2011 – 29 aprile 2012)*, Rossella Vodret, Fausto Gozzi, eds, exh. cat. (Florence, 2011).

[2] *Caravaggio to Canaletto. The Glory of Italian Baroque and Rococo Painting*, Zsuzsanna Dobos with Dóra Sallay, Ágota Varga, eds, exh. cat., Szépművészeti Múzeum, 2013–14 (Budapest, 2013), p. 198, cat. no. 31, p. 242, cat. no. 52 and p. 244, cat. no. 53.

[3] *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque...*, op. cit., pp. 72–73, cat. nos I.6 and I.7 (Fausto Gozzi), p. 76, cat. no. I.10 (Fausto Gozzi).

[4] Ibid., pp. 82–83, cat. no. I.14 (Fausto Gozzi).

Warsaw from a private collection (**fig. 1**)[5] – the strong, diagonal light from above brings out the figures in the foreground. Among works shown at the National Museum in Warsaw, light of similar intensity may also be seen in *The Crucifixion with Saint Elisabeth of Hungary and Santa Francesca Romana* from the Potocki Chapel in the Wawel cathedral (1630)[6] and many other paintings. This is in contrast to the value-based structure that was widespread in the late 16th century and sometimes later, where the foreground featured dark elements leading the viewer's gaze towards the illuminated main scene in the centre.

The harbingers of Guercino's manner of using light may already be seen in the oeuvre of Titian. The Venetian master's idea to bring out the foreground of the composition with a decisive light independent of the dawn far above the horizon (e.g., *Saint Jerome in Penitence*, Nuevos Museos, Real Monasterio, El Escorial) was referred to by numerous Venetian painters, such as Simone Peterzano (*Penitent Saint Jerome*, Ufficcio parrocchiale della chiesa di San Martino, Bollate),[7] as well as Ippolito Scarsella from Ferrara called lo Scarsellino, whose art made a lasting impact on the young Guercino.[8] However, only Peterzano's pupil Caravaggio was able to bring out a truly dramatic effect from the above-mentioned value-based scheme in his moving *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (c. 1595, The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford): the delicate light, merely visible far in the darkness of the night, is contrasted with the "scenic" illumination of figures in the foreground, most likely inspired by contemporary theatre practice.[9]

Yet the young master from Cento did not first come across the value-based structure in Rome, but in his native Emilia, in the works of Bologna-based painters such as Denys Calvaert and the Carracci: Annibale (e.g., *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1592, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna)[10] and in particular Ludovico. Among works by the latter, the most intensive light may be seen in the painting from the ciborium of the Carthusian church of San Cristoforo in Ferrara (*Jews Gathering Manna*, 1595, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Ferrara)[11] and *Susannah and the Elders* (late 16th c., Banca Popolare dell'Emilia, Modena), as well as *Saint Cecilia* created after his visit to Rome in 1602 (early 17th c., Rome, Pinacoteca Capitolina, possibly from the monastery of San Michele in Bosco in Bologna, **fig. 2**).[12] The saint in the foreground is brought out from the darkness by strong illumination resembling a spotlight. This compositional measure can be seen in a handful of paintings by Guido Reni from his brief period of fascination with Caravaggio's Roman works, such as *The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*

[5] Ibid., pp. 106–09, cat. no. I.25 (Laura Muti). See also *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri Il Guercino 1591–1666. Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico, Cento, Pinacoteca Civica e Chiesa del Rosario 6 settembre – 10 novembre 1991*, Denis Mahon, ed. (Bologna, 1991), p. 96, cat. no. 15 (Daniela de Sarno Prignano).

[6] *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*..., op. cit., pp. 120–23, cat. no. I.30 (Joanna Kilian).

[7] Both paintings are compared by Enrico M. Dal Pozzolo, *L'Allegoria della Musica di Simone Peterzano, allievo di Tiziano e maestro di Caravaggio* (Florence, 2012), pp. 22–25.

[8] For the importance of Scarsellino's "Venetian" light for Guercino see Denis Mahon, "Gli inizi del periodo giovanile (sino al 1616)," in *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri Il Guercino 1591–1666*..., op. cit., pp. 1–15, here pp. 14–15.

[9] For the theatre origin of light arrangements in Caravaggio's paintings see John Varriano, *Caravaggio. The Art of Realism* (University Park, 2006), p. 39.

[10] For more information on the painting see *Annibale Carracci*, exh. cat., Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna; DART Chiostro di Bramante, Rome, 2006–07 (Milan, 2006), p. 252 (Alessandro Brogi).

[11] For more information on the painting see *Ludovico Carracci*, Andrea Emiliani, ed., exh. cat., Museo Civico Archeologico–Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, 1993 (Bologna, [1993]), p. 90, cat. no. 41 and p. 155, cat. no. 71 (Gail Feigenbaum).

[12] *Ludovico Carracci*..., op. cit., p. 116, cat. no. 54 and p. 155, cat. no. 71 (Gail Feigenbaum).

– commissioned in 1606 by Caravaggio's patron Ottavio Costa as an altarpiece for the church of San Alessandro in Coscente (Museo Diocesano, Albenga, 1606)[13] – or *Saint Francis with an Angel Musician* (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna, c. 1607).[14]

Painters from the Parma school bathed their scenes in even more glaring light than the Bolognese – in particular Sisto Badalocchio, formed in the Bolognese workshop of the Carracci and during several years spent in Rome, where he discovered the revolutionary works by Caravaggio. His manner of structuring composition using light is best exemplified by *The Baptism of Clorinda by Tancred* (c. 1610, Galleria Estense, Modena)[15] and *Crucifixion with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Francis* (c. 1615–17, private collection).[16] Similar effects are particularly visible in the works of Bartolomeo Schedoni, born in Modena but active in Parma, who visited Rome too early to directly witness the above-mentioned experiments of the Lombard master. In spite of that, focused light in the foreground of *Saint Francis* (c. 1607–9, Galleria Nazionale, Parma) or *The Entombment* and *Three Marys at the Tomb* (1610–12, ibid.)[17] may compete with Caravaggio's dramatic representations, excelling the achievements of Ludovico Carracci and Guido Reni in this respect.

Like Caravaggio, the above-mentioned North Italian artists could have been inspired to use the aforementioned effects by contemporary theatre practice described by Angelo Ingegnieri in his book published in Ferrara at the time. The author recommended flooding the front of the scene with light using hidden lamps.[18] Hence it is difficult to ultimately decide whether the master from Cento owes his characteristic take on light to the contemplation of specific works, such as Badalocchio's *Baptism of Clorinda by Tancred*, or rather to independent observation of effects created by lamps. At the time, the question of artificial illumination absorbed a number of artists from the north of Italy, not just Guercino. However, contrary to most of the others, the latter used this effect to create an atmosphere of contemplation, reminiscent of *Saint Cecilia* (**fig. 2**).

One example of a composition that was intimate rather than theatrical is *Madonna and Child Blessing* (**fig. 3**), for which Barbieri was paid on 26 November 1629.[19] Hence, it is likely to

[13] *Roma al tempo di Caravaggio 1600–1630 (Roma Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Venezia Saloni Monumentali 16 novembre 2011 – 5 febbraio 2012), Opere*, Rossella Vodret, ed., exh. cat. (Milan, 2011), p. 34, cat. no. 4 (Barbara Ghelfi).

[14] D. Stephen Pepper, *Guido Reni. A Complete Catalogue of His Works with an Introductory Text* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 23, 221, cat. no. 25 and p. 222, cat. no. 28; Richard E. Spear, *The 'Divine' Guido Reni. Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven–London, 2007), p. 288.

[15] *Gli Este. Rinascimento e barocco a Ferrara e Modena (Venaria Reale 8 marzo – 6 luglio 2014)*, Stefano Casciu, Marcello Toffanello, Franco Cosimo Panini, eds, exh. cat. (Venaria Reale, 2014), p. 216, cat. no. 216 (Federico Fischetti).

[16] Erich Schleier, "Due segnalazioni per Sisto Badalocchio," in *Arte Cristiana*, vol. 102, no. 881 (2014), pp. 105–08, here pp. 106–07.

[17] Dating: *Galleria Nazionale di Parma. Catalogo delle opere. Il Seicento*, Lucia Fornari Schianchi, Franco Maria Ricci, eds (Milan, 1999), pp. 36–38, cat. no. 473; pp. 42–48, cat. nos 476 and 477 (Lucia Fornari Schianchi).

[18] "[La Scena] resterà lucidissima, senza ch'altri s'avvegga donde, od almeno in qual maniera se ne venga sì bella luce. [...] habbiasi avvertenza [...] di fare, che tutta la luce vada à percuoter la fronte della Scena [...]" – Angelo Ingegneri, *Della poesia rappresentativa & del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche* [online] (Ferrara, 1598), p. 66, [retrieved: 27 April 2014], at: <https://books.google.pl/books?id=xxU8AAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Angelo+Ingegneri,+Della+poesia+rappresentativa+%26+del+modo+di+rappresentare+le+favole+sceniche,&hl=pl&sa=X&ei=-jkAVbSrMYLcaPvIgrAI&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Angelo%20Ingegneri%2C%20Della%20poesia%20rappresentativa%20%26%20del%20modo%20di%20rappresentare%20le%20favole%20sceniche%2C&f=false>. Varriano, *Caravaggio*..., op. cit., cited this treatise in the context of light in the paintings by the Lombard artist.

[19] See *Guercino 1591–1600*..., op. cit., p. 120, cat. no. 24 (Pietro di Natale).

have been among such works as *The Resurrected Christ Appears to the Virgin* (1628–30),[20] which delighted Velázquez during his visit to Cento in the early autumn of that year. An ordinary, modestly-furnished room, enshrouded in darkness, is only scarcely illuminated by a diagonal streak of light entering through the crown glass window on the left of the composition – like in contemporary Dutch paintings, early works by Caravaggio up to *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599–1600, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome) or, much earlier, in *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* ("Madonna di Senigallia") by Piero della Francesca (c. 1480–91, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino).[21] However, contrary to della Francesca's work, which Barbieri did not see, the Virgin and the naked Child, who is standing on the table directly in front of the viewer in the scene at hand, are enhanced by a concentrated beam of what seems like sunlight, falling diagonally from the left in the foreground. One may assume that such effects were aided by studio practice, which consisted in executing individual preparatory studies from live models in a narrow streak of light and arranging them in a larger whole in the painted version.[22] The above-described luminist measure is more radical than that employed by Velázquez in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (c. 1620, National Gallery, London) and heralds the use of sharper light, e.g., in his *Joseph's Tunic* (1630, Monasterio de San Lorenzo, El Escorial). Therefore, the Spanish master must have taken a liking to this effect. Contrary to the Spaniard's later work, neither the direct scope nor the reflections of the bright light that illuminate the figures in the foreground encompass but a mere scrap of the background. Contemporary critic Giulio Mancini considered scenes painted in such a manner to be unnatural, but limited this judgement to Caravaggio and his school, without referring to Emilian artists: "[...] for it is impossible to arrange within a single room illuminated by only one window a large number of figures who enact the story [...]."[23] However, what the author of the quoted passage did not take into account was that Caravaggio and his followers did not strive to create a realistic historical or genre scene and reproduce the actual light and shade in the room, but to expressively contrast modest surroundings with a unique event – to use light to lend meaning. Guercino also directed the viewer's attention to the wondrously illuminated body of Christ, thus probably accentuating its Eucharistic dimension. Nevertheless, the reserved, everyday atmosphere of the work in question has little in common with the theatrical atmosphere that permeates the compositions of the Lombard master. These determinants could have been what persuaded Velázquez and other recipients of Barbieri's works, as he did not have to face the same accusations as Caravaggio.

In 1616, Guercino established Accademia del Nudo in Cento. Not much is known about its activity apart from the fact that twenty-three pupils enrolled in the school just a year after its foundation and it is likely to have carefully cultivated drawing from a live model. The figure of

[20] *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*..., op. cit., pp. 118–19, cat. no. I.29 (Pietro di Natale).

[21] Ronald Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca* (New York, 1992), pp. 257–61.

[22] Varriano, *Caravaggio*..., op. cit., p. 15 argues that Caravaggio would sketch individual figures in the sunlight that entered the studio through slightly open shutters, and then combine such sketches into a whole.

[23] Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, as cited in Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, translated by Mette Hjort (London–Chicago, 1995), p. 48, [retrieved: 30 May 2015], at: <https://books.google.pl/books?id=v2H8SWWUCGAC&lpg=PP1&hl=pl&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>. According to Denis Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* (London, 1947), pp. 34–50, this critique could refer to the young Guercino. Studies of the Warburg Institute, Fritz Saxl, ed.

the martyr in *Saint Sebastian Succoured by Two Angels*, a small-format painting from a private collection (**fig. 4**) that was also shown in Warsaw, seems to result from such exercises.[24] It is a slightly amended version of the 1617 composition (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), which testifies to the considerable popularity of this view, reproduced in engraving by Giovanni Battista Pasqualini in 1623[25] (the print was sadly absent from the exhibition). The shape of the young man, lying on his back in a seemingly accidental pose, with his legs splayed towards the viewer, is evocatively brought out with rays falling diagonally from the back, i.e., in an untypical manner. As a result of this view against the light, particularly favoured by Tintoretto, and especially thanks to the slight augmenting of feet and shins in the foreground in comparison to shoulders, arms and head, in line with the principles of optics, the viewer has the impression of very close contact with the saint – according to the demands of post-Tridentine art applicable at the time, he may feel obliged to approach the painting and take an active part in the depicted drama. This impression of tangible realism, already present in the composition held in Cambridge, is additionally emphasized by the soft and sensuous modelling of the body.

At first sight, it may seem that – brilliantly executed as it is – the presented version is just one of many scenes of martyrdom typical for Catholic Baroque painting. It is therefore worth reminding that the theme of a supine nude with his feet towards the viewer was previously approached in nearby Bologna by Ludovico Carracci in his *Study of a Nude Boy* (**fig. 5**). The chalk sketch was executed from a live model seen against the light. This drawing is justly regarded as an example of overcoming Mannerism by returning to nature. However, contrary to appearances, this is a carefully posed rather than an accidental view – as may be inferred from the studied arrangement of the model's limbs.[26] Not enlarging the feet in relation to the head in the background, i.e., the abandonment of linear perspective, represents an even more evident deviation from nature towards idealization. This trick was in widespread use among Early Modern Italian painters ever since they learned to structure the space according to the rules of *costruzione legittima*, which is best illustrated by Mantegna's *Dead Christ* (before 1488, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) and *Man Reclining*, drawn by him from life (c. 1485–90, The British Museum, London).[27] Both figures were rendered without differentiating the sizes of individual body parts, as if from afar, which is contrasted with the starkly rescaled stone slabs on which they rest, viewed from a closer distance. Coming back to the times of Barbieri, we could indicate, i.a., the similarly presented *Dead Christ* recently attributed to Bologna-based painter Lorenzo Garbieri (c. 1610–11, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).[28]

Theoreticians of painting did not formulate any demands as to the distortions of the human figure. Leonardo da Vinci only recommended the following: "If you mean to represent a round ball very high up [...] it will be necessary to make it oblong, like the shape of an egg,

[24] *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*..., op. cit., pp. 94–97, cat. no. I.20 (Daniele de Sarno Prignano). It had not yet been included in the catalogues *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri*..., op. cit.; *Guercino 1591 – 1666*, op. cit.

[25] *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri*..., op. cit., p. 14, n. 76 and p. 66 (Denis Mahon).

[26] Albert Boesten-Stengel, *Carracci Studien. Studien zu Annibale und Agostino Carracci unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Zeichnungen*, **vol. 1:** *Vorbildnachahmung und Bilderfindung im italienischen Frühbarock*, **Toruń,** 2008, p. 235.

[27] Most recently on the painting: Giovanni Agosti, "Mantegna 2046," in *Mantegna 1431–1506*, Giovanni Agosti, Dominique Thiébaut, eds, exh. cat., The Louvre, Paris, 2008–09 (Milan, 2008), pp. 29–51, here p. 44. On the drawing: ibid., p. 238 (Dominique Thiébaut).

[28] *Caravaggio to Canaletto*..., op. cit., p. 182, cat. no. 23 (Alessandro Brogi).

and to place yourself (that is, the eye, or point of view) so far back, as that its outline or circumference may appear round."[29] This advice was generally ignored by artists; Giulio Tròili (called Paradosso), 17th-century scholar of perspective, explained it by the fact that contrary to shapes with straight lines, a ball in optical foreshortening seems very much deformed[30] (**fig. 6**). This may explain why Mantegna and other masters – intuitively or consciously – attempted to adjust optical phenomena by avoiding to draw the human body in foreshortenings. For we are familiar with the proportions of bodies like with the shape of the sphere: by using this knowledge, optical impulses delivered by the eye are subconsciously processed so that figures and spheres are construed as basically undistorted, i.e., in a different manner than they would be registered by technical devices such as a *camera obscura* or a camera lens, devoid of the control of the mind.[31]

For the above-mentioned reasons, Guercino's innovative approach to rescale (i.e., deform) Saint Sebastian should be regarded as exceptional even in comparison to the Carracci reforms or juxtaposed with the risky experiments undertaken at the same time in the circle of Caravaggio that consisted in depicting an object distorted by refracted light without relying on the requirement of idealization.[32] However, contrary to the aforementioned Caravaggisti, Barbieri found a way of abiding by the principles of optics without producing any unpleasant aesthetic effects. Owing to the shrewd choice of the pose of the model, whose feet – accentuated by the perspective – are arranged in a diagonal foreshortening so that their scale is not too conspicuous, he managed to reconcile the requirements of realism, idealization and Baroque expression better than artists such as Mantegna, thus avoiding the accusations of experts who criticized the achievements of Caravaggio. By this deviation from approved solutions – which, after all, shaped the expectations of viewers – Barbieri enhanced the impression that the martyr is at arm's length. Thereby, he went even beyond the pioneering achievements of Correggio, who – already one hundred years earlier – used the "wide-angle" view in some of his altar paintings, albeit without the scale gradation of individual elements, inviting viewers to observe the scene from close up. For all of the above-mentioned reasons, *Saint Sebastian* was soon copied, reproduced as a print, and even adapted by Michele Desubleo, who worked in Reni's Bolognese studio, in the form of *Jacob's Dream* that was once exhibited in Warsaw (**fig. 7**).[33]

On the other hand, in a large altarpiece by Guercino that was also created in 1618 – *Madonna Adoring the Child with Penitent Saint Peter, San Carlo Borromeo, an Angel and a Donor* (**fig. 8**)[34] – all four persons gathered in the earthly sphere at the bottom of the composition are depicted with

[29] Leonardo da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting*, translated by John Francis Rigaud, Esq., (London, 1835), p. 53 [retrieved: 30 May 2015], at: <https://ia802605.us.archive.org/27/items/davincionpaintingooleon/davincionpaintingooleon.pdf>.

[30] Giulio Tròili, *Paradossi per pratticare la prospettiva senza saperla, fiori per facilitare l'intelligenza, frutti per non operare alla cieca* (Bologna, 1683), *Parte III: Paradossi overo fiori, e frutti di prospettiva prattica*, p. 25 (spheres) [online] [retrieved: 12 April 2014], at: <http://echo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/ECHOdocuView?mode=imagepath&url=/permanent/library/GKRQ3HY9/pageimg>.

[31] Marcin Fabiański, *Correggio and sacra conversazione* (Krakow, 1994), p. 67.

[32] Id., "Rifrazioni nella pittura al tempo di Caravaggio," *Artibus et Historiae*, Ann 28 (56) (2007), pp. 207–23.

[33] *Opus sacrum. Catalogue of the Exibition from the Collection of Barbara Piasecka Johnson, Royal Castle in Warsaw 1990*, Józef Grabski, ed., exh. cat. (Vienna, 1990), pp. 230–33, cat. no. 39 (Adam S. Labuda and Wolfgang Prohaska).

[34] See also *Guercino 1591–1666*..., op. cit., p. 82, cat. no. 9 (Pietro Di Natale).

no difference of scale. This fact could be seen as surprising, especially in the case of the donor's bust, which is almost encroaching on the zone of the spectator – in particular in the context of the similarly placed but enlarged head of the hermit in Parmigianino's small canvas *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* (c. 1527–31, National Gallery, London, 74.2 × 57.2 cm), meant to be seen from a close distance, or the similarly increased busts of Hyanthe and Clymène in Toussaint Dubreuil's *Hyanthe and Clymène Offering a Sacrifice to Venus* (c. 1527–1602, the Louvre, Paris, 176 × 140 cm). However, Guercino modelled himself on another composition he had known since childhood: *The Holy Family with Saint Francis* from the Piombini Chapel in the Capuchin church in Cento (1591, Pinacoteca Civica, Cento, 225 × 166 cm) by Ludovico Carracci,[35] who did not increase the heads of the pair of donors in the bottom corner of the canvas. In order to achieve the sensation of correct perspective, one should step back from the works of Carracci and Guercino to a distance that would flatten the scale differences like a pair of binoculars or a telephoto lens. So, if we compare the perspective of Barbieri's work in question with that used at the same time in *Saint Sebastian*, whose small dimensions indicate that it was destined for private contemplation from close up, we will reach the conclusion that the master from Cento made use of the subtleties of perception so as to adapt the commissioned compositions to their purpose in an even better manner than his predecessors: differently in the case of a retable to be seen from afar and differently – for a picture intended for private contemplation from close up.

The above remarks do not refer to the dimensions of Mary and Jesus seated on the billowy clouds in the top part of the discussed altarpiece (**fig. 8**). This fragment of the composition is possibly Guercino's second copy of the revered *Madonna della Ghiara* from Reggio Emilia, with which he was probably familiar through a print he previously used in a clumsy fresco.[36] A slightly smaller scale of both figures in comparison to those at the bottom of the altar composition does not correspond in the slightest to the distance from which we actually see them, i.e., at least several hundred metres. Were we then to treat the scene as a faithful reproduction of nature, both figures would have to be gigantic, as people of average height seen from that far would appear microscopic. One alternative would be to depict thick clouds one could sit or stand upon in miniature scale in the front of the composition. This can be seen in numerous paintings, such as several works by Annibale Carracci (e.g., *Baptism of Christ*, 1585, Santi Gregorio e Siro, Bologna; *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1592, Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale; *The Temptation of Saint Anthony Abbot*, c. 1598–1600, National Gallery, London) and Ludovico Carracci (e.g., *Transfiguration*, 1595, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna; *The Apostles at the Tomb of the Virgin*, before 1603, Church of Corpus Domini, Bologna) – usually in a slightly smaller scale in comparison to the foreground – but not in nature. Therefore, the painter did not so much invoke nature as contemporary stage practice, where miniature models of clouds were used to transport actors in plain sight of the audience.[37] However, even if Guercino did paint such theatrical cumuli right behind the surface of the painting, then he should have depicted

[35] *Ludovico Carracci*..., op. cit., p. 66, cat. no. 31 (Gail Feigenbaum).

[36] See *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*..., op. cit., pp. 66–67, cat. no. I.2 (Fausto Gozzi).

[37] On the influence of sacral theatre on the method of rendering clouds by painters see, e.g., John Shearman, "Raphael's Clouds and Correggio's," in *Studi su Raffaello. Atti del congresso internazionale di studi, Urbino 6–14 aprile 1984*, Micaela Sambucco Hamoud, Maria L. Strocchi, eds (Urbino, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 657–68. Ingegneri, *Della poesia*..., op. cit., does not mention clouds. On the other hand, the latest monograph on clouds includes only one of Guercino's frescoes, *Aurora* – see Alessandra Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439–1650: Italian Art and Theatre* ([Farnham–Burlington], 2014), p. 155. Visual Culture in Early Modernity.

the Virgin and Child in a diagonal foreshortening from below, at least like both Carracci and almost like he himself did in *The Assumption* (c. 1622).[38]

Interestingly, in order to discern the aforementioned contradictions, certain intellectual effort is required. We spontaneously consider Guercino's composition as true to reality and optically justified. This seeming paradox may be explained by being accustomed to an artistic convention: at least since the *Madonna of Foligno* by Raphael (1512, Pinacoteca, The Vatican), who substituted previous visions in an arbitrary setting with a "realistic" view of clouds, the vast majority of modern Italian painters, otherwise striving to reflect the physical reality of the world more or less in line with its principles, usually resorted to similar compromises in such cases.[39] Even Guercino used the said measure quite routinely, as may be seen in such works exhibited in Warsaw as *Madonna and Child in Glory with Saint Pancras and a Nun* (Saint Clare?) from the retable in Renazzo (c. 1615–16),[40] *Madonna del Carmine Presenting a Scapular to a Carmelite (Saint Albert) in the Presence of Saint Francis and Another Franciscan Monk* (1618)[41] and the angel from *Saint Francis with an Angel Playing Violin* (c. 1620)[42] from the collection of the Potocki family in Krzeszowice near Krakow, now held at the National Museum in Warsaw.

As can be inferred from the above observations, the group of Guercino's paintings presented in Warsaw invited spectators to meditate on their form: light and shade and the colour palette, which are usually distorted in the reproduction process, as well as perspective, whose subtleties are only revealed when studying small or large original canvases – not photographs whose dimensions are adapted to the format of the given publication. At the same time, one could discover that – contrary to commonly held opinions – certain aspects of the oeuvre of the Emilian master were no less innovative than the revolutionary solutions employed by Caravaggio. However, contrary to most Caravaggisti, Guercino did not mean to shock viewers with risky novelties. Instead, he cleverly used them to enhance the artistic and substantive impact of his works, which therefore gained both a unique imprint and considerable popularity among his contemporaries. Consequently, despite occasionally transgressing the generally accepted border between realism and idealization, the works of Barbieri, who was raised in Cento and active mostly in this town, triumphed faster than the art of another great small-town master from the nearby Correggio one hundred years before. This provides a deeper justification to the title of the Warsaw exhibition: *The Triumph of the Baroque*.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

[38] *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*..., op. cit., pp. 114–15, cat. no. I.27 (Pietro di Natale).

[39] See, e.g., *Dosso Dossi. Rinascimenti eccentrici al Castello del Buonconsiglio (Trento, Castello del Buonconsiglio 12 luglio 2014 – 2 novembre 2014)*, Vincenzo Farinella, Lia Camerlengo, Francesca de Gramatica, eds (Cinisello Balsamo, 2014), pp. 62–64 (Marialucia Menegatti). La Città degli Uffizi. Collana di mostre diretta da Antonio Natali, vol. 16.

[40] *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*..., op. cit., pp. 92–93, cat. no. I.19 (Pietro di Natale).

[41] Ibid., pp. 102–03, cat. no. 23 (Pietro di Natale).

[42] Ibid., pp. 110–12, cat. no. 26 (Joanna Kilian).