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Beltà crudele. Love in the Art of Guercino

E labra ha di rubino
Ed occhi ha di zaffiro
La bella e cruda donna ond'io sospiro.
Ha d'alabastro fino
La man che volge del tuo carro il freno,
Di marmo il seno e di diamante il core.
Qual meraviglia, Amore [...]

GIAMBATTISTA MARINO, *Beltà crudele*[1]

Authors of self-portraits, like authors of autobiographies, have more possibilities to present their philosophical and ethical beliefs than ordinary portrait artists or biographers. A self-portrait can act as the Socratic mirror of self-knowledge – and mirror of the soul. This is how Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Guercino, was described in 1678 by Carlo Cesare Malvasia in *Felsina pittrice*: "[...] he had a good, rather sanguine temperament. By nature, he was kind, cheerful [...] outstandingly honest, hostile to lying, extremely courteous, modest, merciful, devout, pure... He was thought to be unblemished and so he also appeared, given his radiant looks and considering his life."[2] Themes that came to light in Guercino's early biographies – emphasizing his virtuousness and circumspection towards women – were also taken up by later writers, experts and researchers of his art.

Self-Portrait with an Amorous Theme

In his self-portrait from the National Gallery of Art in Washington (**fig. 1**),[3] Guercino presents himself in a very specific manner: as the author of a "painting within a painting," at the same time delivering a manifesto of his own idea of love. This self-portrait could be described as *autoportrait moralisé*. The image does not flatter the painter's vanity; his squinting right eye – the *occhio guercio* that gave him his nickname: Guercino – is not hidden in the shade. He is situated at the edge of the painting, in elegant, modest attire, with his focused face turned towards the viewer. Behind him, we see his canvas depicting Cupid, who delicately, yet firmly holds a greyhound by its collar. In the foreground of this "painting within a painting," on

[1] *Rime del Signor Cavalier Marino parte terza. Madrigali & Canzoni* (Venice, 1674), p. 3.

[2] Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice. Vite de pittori bolognesi*, vol. 2 (Bologna, 1678), p. 383 (2nd edition: Bologna, 1841, p. 272).

[3] Inv. no. 2005.13.1.

a rectangular base that resembles a stone used to blend pigments, there is a serpent eating its own tail. This ancient motif, called *ouroboros*[4] by the Greeks, became conventionalized in the era of iconology manuals. It depicts the never-ending cycle of nature. In one of his emblems, Andrea Alciato described this image as a symbol of immortality and eternity (**fig. 2**).[5] According to Cesare Ripa, author of *Iconologia: or, Moral Emblems* published in 1603, this circular figure, without a beginning or end, was a perfectly suitable representation of eternity.[6] In his works *Amorum emblemata* (1608) and *Amoris divini emblemata* (1615), Otto van Veen, Netherlandish painter, draughtsman and humanist, created one hundred and twenty-four emblems depicting putti or cupids, each time using a different lemma: a motto on the power of Love borrowed from ancient poets and philosophers. His eternal love was personified by Cupid seen against clouds, surrounded by a circle in the form of a serpent eating its tail.[7]

In the context of iconography inspired by emblem books,[8] the presence of *ouroboros* in the discussed self-portrait signifies eternal love that continuously revives itself. This motif (*serpens condivorens* or *serpens qui caudam devorat* from the antique tradition) is almost identical to the infernal halo over the head of Mary Magdalene in a painting by Guido Cagnacci (**fig. 3**).[9] In it, the saint is depicted with flowers, an hourglass and a skull; her body is oozing sensual charm. This work, devoid of an iconographic analogy, is currently interpreted as an allegory of human life and perfectly corresponds to Baroque poetry, which describes romantic longings using the language of religious asceticism, often combining love and death, carnal passions and religious ecstasy.[10] The amorous iconography of the self-portrait is complemented by the presence of a hunting dog – a greyhound symbolizing fidelity, but also vigilance, i.e., qualities that are helpful when deciding one's path in life.

[4] Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres* (Paris, 1982), p. 716.

[5] See Andrea Alciato, *Omnia Andreae Alciati V.C.* (Antwerp, 1577), p. 449, emblem CXXXII (132).

[6] Ceesar Ripa, *Iconologia: or, Moral Emblems*, illustrated by I. Fuller, by the care and at the charge of p. Tempest (London, 1709), p. 39.

[7] Otto van Veen, *Amorum Emblemata* (Antwerp: Venalia apud Auctorem, 1608), emblem: Amor Aeternus [s. p.]; see also *Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI und XVII Jahrhunderts* Arthur Henkel, Albrecht Schöne, eds (Stuttgart, 1976), p. 656.

[8] Seventeenth-century emblem books were the basic source of iconography for a number of paintings and drawings by Guercino, in particular those depicting various types of love and the power of Cupid. He often took up popular emblematic motifs such as Cupid restraining Mars, the scolding of Cupid or destruction of his attributes of love. Cf. *Venus Scolding Cupid*, c. 1621–23, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. See Nicolas Turner, Carol Plazzotta, *Drawings by Guercino from British Collections*, exh. cat., The British Museum, London, 1991, London 1991, plate 68, p. 97; *Venus Burning the Instruments of Love*, c. 1650, private collection, New Haven, Connecticut. See *Guercino. Master Draftsman. Works from North American Collections*, David M. Stone, ed., exh. cat., Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge (Mass.); National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Cleveland Museum of Art, 1991, Bologna 1991, pp. 138–239, cat. no. 60; *Cupid Restraining Mars*, c. 1640, Courtauld Institute of Art, London (inv. no. D.1952.RW.1349); *Venus, Cupid and Time*, c. 1624–26, Dunham Massey, Cheshire (inv. no. 932333).

[9] Fondazione Cavallini Sgarbi, Ferrara. See Erich Schleier, "Una tarda Allegoria della Vanità di Guido Cagnacci," *Arte documento*, 22 (2006), pp. 192–95; *Misticismo del nudo. Capolavori dalle collezioni Molinari Pradelli, Sgarbi, Guidi di Bagno*, exh. cat., Pinacoteca Civica "Il Guercino" di Cento, 2011 (Cento, 2011), pp. 20–23 (with previous bibliography); *Il giardino segreto. Grandes Maestros de la Pintura Italiana en la Colección Sgarbi*, exh. cat., Caja de Burgos, Burgos, 2013–14 (Burgos, 2014), pp. 120–21.

[10] One splendid example of amorous Baroque poetry, ambiguously combining eroticism and death, is Giambattista Marino's sonnet *Ad un cadavere* [To a cadaver]. See Giambattista Marino, *Liryki miłosne (wybór)* (Łódź, 1996), p. 34; Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Giambattista Marino i Jan Andrzej Morsztyn: dialog poetów* (Warsaw, 2000), passim.

Guercino's painting, most likely created in 1655, summarises his interest in the philosophical and ethical aspect of love that permeates his entire oeuvre and, at the same time, represents the creed of the already mature painter. The self-portrait is an artistic manifesto of his faith in true and lasting love – *amor*. What may be regarded as an antithesis of this self-portrait is *Cupid Pulling the Ear of a Wild Boar* from the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow,[11] an allegory of carnal love. Sensual passion and the danger of dissoluteness are, after all, inherent elements of *amor*. The wild boar symbolises consuming lust and morally reprehensible love understood as debauchery – *voluptas*. At Cupid's feet, we see a quotation from Saint John Chrysostom, Father of the Church and indefatigable defender of morality, who was often referred to in the 17th century: *FACIT PORCOS EX HOMINIBUS* ('turns men into swine').[12] The postulate of equating love to lust which turns men into beasts is particularly pronounced in ancient literature (e.g., Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*) and in Baroque works referring to it (Angelica's magic in Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*).

The self-portrait from Washington is a perfect starting point for reflection on Guercino's works concerning love. Since the Middle Ages, this type of love had been referred to using the Latin word *amor*, denoting a feeling between two people, contrary to the Christian love of God, *caritas*, identified with fulfilling God's will and having nothing to do with the act of physical intimacy.

In Baroque culture, the term *amor* was endowed with numerous meanings, which is why it was perfectly suited to depict emotions, contradictions and contrasts forming the basis of 17th-century aesthetics. This was a period of unprecedented bloom of amorous iconography shaped based on ancient and Renaissance patterns. It embodied the conflict of spirituality and physicality, the dilemma between eroticism and sanctity and, in Neoplatonic ideas, the coexistence and balance of both these elements. The admiration of sensual beauty was inherently accompanied by fear of the sinful nature of physical contact. A vital category of Baroque emblematic art, which was also important for Guercino's oeuvre, was carnal lust – *consupientia* – a quality often associated with *amor*, though not tantamount to love in the strict sense of the word.

Guercino owes his fame predominantly to religious paintings: altars and canvases created for private devotion. Yet, although rarely taken up by researchers, the subject of *amor* understood both as affection and a philosophical question is an equally powerful theme in the painter's body of work.

Venus, Mars and Cupid

In the painting *Venus, Mars and Cupid* (Galleria Estense, Modena)[13] from c. 1633 (**fig. 4**), the sitting goddess is resting her left hand on a quiver full of arrows. She is pointing her finger at the viewer, at whom Cupid is aiming his bow – hit by his arrow, the viewer would have been

[11] Inv. no. Ż 2702. This painting (113 × 94 cm) may represent a pendant of the Washington work (116 × 95.5 cm) – an allegory of carnal love as opposed to eternal love.

[12] See Massimo Pulini, "I cinque sentimenti del Guercino," in *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento...*, op. cit., p. 75; see also id., "Sull'ultimo Guercino," in *Guercino ritrovato. Collezioni e committenze riminesi 1643–1660*, Pier Giorgio Pasini, ed., exh. cat., Museo della Città, Rimini, 2002–03 (Rimini, 2002), p. 67.

[13] Inv. no. 40. See *Gli Este. Rinascimento e Barocco a Ferrara e Modena*, exh. cat., Reggia di Venaria, Sala delle Arti, 2014 (Modena, 2014), pp. 224–25, cat. no. 61 (with previous bibliography).

doomed to *potentissimus affectus*.[14] Venus's gesture extends beyond the surface of the painting – the border between the imagined space and the real space of the spectator. The figures are directly facing the viewer, "inspecting" and attracting him with their attentive and provocative gaze. Through these illusionistic methods, the painter invites the spectator to a sophisticated game, intriguing him and deluding the eye.

The painting shows how deeply Guercino was dependent on the Cinquecento tradition. Such representations had their broader cultural context in the 16th century. The painter from Cento is greatly indebted to the artistic area of Ferrara, in particular to Dosso Dossi and Ippolito Scarselli (called Scarsellino), and – via the latter – to painting of the Serenissima. In Venetian art, nostalgia for classical, sensual beauty (referred to as *venustas*) manifested itself in paintings depicting the naked Venus. Despite a multitude of variants, the rules of their composition, formulated already in Giorgione and Titian's *Sleeping Venus*[15] from c. 1510, survived throughout the entire 16th and 17th centuries. In Guercino's paintings, like in 16th-century Venetian art, the naked, sensual goddess, full of natural charm, embodies eternal beauty. The hidden message behind paintings on this subject may be found in 16th-century literary texts inspired by the Neoplatonic doctrine, in which beauty is equated with love. The naked Venus personified innate beauty (*pulchritudo innata*), as opposed to artificial, man-made beauty (*ornamentum*).

In the 17th century, almost all depictions of nudity required "idealization," sublimation, elevation. Depicting Venus in the nude removed her from the everyday sphere, liberated her from fashion, era, time or place. The key to interpret images of the nude goddess is the semantic tradition, in which nudity is tantamount to the classical, the noble and the once truly natural – i.e., proper from the ethical standpoint. This is why paintings depicting Venus, Cupid and Mars were often commissioned as wedding gifts. The naked goddess embodied eroticism and sexuality that had been subjected to rules, elevated, moderate and allowed – a harmony of *pudicitia* and *voluptas*, modesty and sensual pleasure, which should co-exist in marriage. Such paintings were inspired by the literary *dialoghi d'amore*, which were fashionable in the 16th and 17th centuries and often read during social events of the high society. They emerged as a reaction to the highly popular philosophical treatise of the same title written by Leone Ebreo and published in 1502. Paintings depicting Venus may be regarded as their visual counterpart.

Guercino was commissioned to paint *Venus, Mars and Cupid* by a sophisticated collector; Malvasia recalls that the work was made for "a nobleman from Modena [...] as a gift for His Highness" (*per un gentiluomo Modenese* [...] *da donare a quel Serenissmo*).[16] It was probably painted for Francesco I d'Este, Duke of Modena, and placed in the Camera dei Sogni in the Palazzo Ducale in Sassuolo. Like most representations of the naked Venus, the painting was most likely destined for private apartments and covered with a curtain, which was only opened in order to present the work to a circle of insiders, adding piquancy to the situation. Mars, Venus's quick-tempered lover, is also pulling open the illusionistic curtain. It follows that both the god of war and the viewer opening the real curtain, at whom Cupid is aiming his bow, should be seen as "intruders." The viewer/observer is at the same time the observed. Thanks to this trick, Guercino's painting is more than just a scene of discovering the goddess's nude body; the viewer, absorbed in the plot, becomes an integral part of the work, which, in turn, becomes more evocative.

[14] Andrea Alciati, "Potentissimus affectus amor," in *Emblematum liber* (Augsburg, 1531).

[15] Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, inv. no. 185.

[16] C.C. Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice*..., op. cit., vol. 2 (Bologna, 1678), p. 369 (2nd edition: vol. 2 (Bologna, 1841), p. 263).

The above-mentioned measure exemplified a mode of representation based on voyeurism, which was popular in 17th-century painting both in Italy and in the north of Europe (particularly in the Netherlands). In such works, additional tension is built by the interaction of the painted figures with the viewer.[17] They include, i.a., paintings with an illusionistic curtain (that the viewer should want to open) as well as numerous works of Rembrandt, whom Guercino admired,[18] such as the print entitled *The French Bed* (*Ledikant)* from 1646 (**fig. 5**), in which the viewer peeps in on an amorous scene. The same could be said of Nicolaes Maes's works showing eavesdropping maids, who involve viewers in the act of peeping, turning them into accomplices in the voyeuristic act. In Guercino's 1617 painting *Susannah and the Elders* held at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid[19] (**fig. 6**), erotic tension is built through the stark contrast between the fully illuminated, natural, innocent figure of Susannah, completely devoid of seductive ambiguity and unaware of the presence of intruders, and the figures of the elders, overcome with perverse excitement and only half-lit. The man on the right is staring at Susannah's naked figure, frozen in a pose suggesting immense tension, while his companion is putting his finger over his mouth in a shushing gesture. This gesture is aimed at the viewer, thereby introducing an ironic theme of shared voyeurism to the painting. It is worth noting that a composition emphasizing the viewer's role in the painting to such an extent represented an innovation in Italian art.

According to the principle of *persuasio*, borrowed from antique tradition and employed in the 17th century, painting was to influence the viewer, using all available means to take control of his feelings – not just religious ones, but also the feeling of love. The particular role played by paintings depicting amorous and erotic subjects had already been noticed by 16th-century authors such as Ludovico Ariosto, Ludovico Dolce or Pietro Aretino. In his manual for 17th-century collectors, Giulio Mancini solely recommended that obscene paintings exciting the senses be placed in private rooms and covered with a curtain.[20] In *De' veri precetti della pittura*,[21] published in 1586 – i.e., during the Council of Trent – Giovanni Battista Armenini did not find fault with artists taking up the subject of the love of gods, based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. On the other hand, works that subjected amorous art to stern criticism were also written during the Council of Trent. For instance, in *De picturis et imaginibus sacris*, Giovanni Molano elaborated on the infernal results of romantic and erotic painting.[22] Twenty years before, in

[17] For a detailed study of this tradition in Dutch painting, see Antoni Ziemba, *Iluzja a realizm. Gra z widzem w sztuce holenderskiej 1580–1660* (Warsaw, 2005), p. 173; Piotr Borusowski, "Peeping through the Keyhole: Leonaert Bramer's *Perspectyfkas*," *Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*, 1(37) (2012), pp. 160–72.

[18] In a letter to Antonio Ruffo of 13 June 1660, Guercino wrote: "With regard to the half figure by Rembrandt [...] it is probably completely perfect, for I have seen many of his works in printed form [...] where it may be argued that his selection of colours is both exquisite and ideal, and I regard him as a great master [...]," see Luigi Salerno, *I Dipinti del Guercino* (Rome, 1988), p. 11; V. Ruffo, "La Galleria Ruffo del secolo XVII in Messina," *Bolettino d'Arte* (1916), p. 100.

[19] *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino...*, op. cit., p. 76, cat. no. 23.

[20] Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla Pittura* [1617–21], published for the first time by Adriana Marucchi, with commentary by Luigi Salerno (Rome, 1956–57), p. 141; see also Matteo Piccioni, "Emulare i nobili: tessuti e parati nelle abitazioni degli 'huomini di stato mediocre' nella Roma del Seicento," in *Vestire i palazzi. Stoffe, tessuti e parati negli arredi e nell'arte del Barocco*, Alessandra Rodolfo, Caterina Volpi, eds (Rome, 1956), pp. 421–31.

[21] *Mythologica ed Erotica. Arte e Cultura dall'antichità al XVIII secolo*, Ornella Casazza, Riccardo Gennaiolis, eds, exh. cat., Palazzo Pitti, Museo degli Argenti, Florence, 2005–06 (Florence, 2005), p. 99.

[22] David Freedberg, "Johannes Molanus on Provocative Paintings. De Historia Sanctarum Imaginum et Picturarum," book II, chapter 42, *Journal of the Wartburg and Courtauld Institute*, Ann 34 (1971), pp. 229–45.

Disputatio... de cultu et adoratione imaginum (1552),[23] Dominican monk Ambrogio Catarino Politi accused anyone owning old or contemporary paintings inspired by mythological or Biblical themes with even the slightest erotic potential of idolatry (he criticized such motifs as *Noah's Drunkenness*, *David and Bathsheba*, *Susannah and the Elders*).[24] In *Dialogo degli Errori de'Pittori*[25] of 1564, Giovanni Andrea Giglio referred to *disoneste figure* (obscene images), which could be seen on tavern walls. In literature written in the last quarter of the 16th-century, both authors condemning and praising amorous themes shared the belief in the vast persuasive power of such representations.

Guercino was greatly indebted to the traditions of the Lombard and Venetian Cinquecento (in particular to Titian and Leonardo – in terms of his technique, iconography and theory), which attached a particular role to the influence of erotic paintings. In his *Treatise on Painting*, reflecting on the competition between various disciplines of art, Leonardo da Vinci equipped painting with the power to incite love (*fare accendere gli uomini ad amare*): "And if the poet says he can incite men to love, which is the most important fact among every kind of animal, the painter can do the same, all the more so because he presents the lover with the image of his beloved; and the lover often does with it what he would not do with the writer's delineation of the same charms, i.e. talk with it and kiss it; so great is the painter's influence on the minds of men that he incites them to love and become enamoured of a picture which does not represent any living woman. [...] And I once chanced to paint a picture which represented a divine subject, and it was bought by the lover of her whom it represented, and he wished to strip it of its divine character so as to be able to kiss it without offence. But finally his conscience overcame his desire and his lust and he was compelled to remove the picture from his house. Now go thou, poet, and describe a beautiful woman without giving the semblance of the living thing, and with it arouse such desire in men! [...]. Painting stirs the senses more readily than poetry. [...] Others have painted libidinous acts of such sensuality that they have incited those who gazed on them to similar acts, and poetry could not do this."[26]

Guercino's *Venus, Mars and Cupid* also refers to erotic prints, which functioned in "underground circulation" at the courts of sophisticated patrons.[27] Agostino Carracci's print *Satyr Approaching a Nymph* (1584–89; **fig. 7**) is particularly interesting here – it forms part of the *Lascive* series, which Malvasia described as one of the most admired sets of prints by this artist.[28] Some of them are symbolic and allusive, others – openly pornographic. In this particular print, the artist took up a motif known from ancient art: a naked nymph is surprised in her sleep by a satyr. However, what is innovative here is the typically Baroque measure of involving the viewer in the plot: the satyr's shushing gesture is aimed directly at him. Thereby, they are both

[23] *Mythologica ed Erotica*..., op. cit., p. 98.

[24] Carlo Ginzburg, "Titian, Ovid, and Sixteenth-Century Codes for Erotic Illustration," in *Titian's 'Venus of Urbino'* Rona Goffen, ed. (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 23–36.

[25] D. Freedberg, "Johannes Molanus...," op. cit., pp. 229–45.

[26] Leonardo da Vinci, *Thoughts on Art and Life* [online], tr. Maurice Baring (Boston, 1906), [retrieved: 15 July 2015], pp. 78–79, 124, at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/29904/29904-h/29904-h.htm>.

[27] For the sources and traditions of erotic iconography in modern Italian art see James Grantham Turner, "Profane Love: The Challenge of Sexuality," in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, Andrea Bayer, ed., exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2008–9; Kimbell Art Museum, Forth Worth, 2009 (New York, 2008), pp. 178–84, cf. ibidem, pp. 185–227.

[28] Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice* ..., op. cit., p. 385 (2nd edition: vol. 2 (Bologna, 1841), p. 281).

taking part in the voyeuristic act; the satyr's creeping pose also arouses curiosity as to what will happen next. Guercino must have been familiar with this print and alluded to its ambiguous charm – in the artist's oeuvre, the world of female nudity is filled with intruders, surprise and creeping. This is further exemplified by a drawing from c. 1625 held at the Courtauld Institute of Art – a satyr peeping at naked nymphs sitting on the grass (**fig. 8**).[29]

Nude Models

The viewer peeping at the women in Guercino's *Landscape with Women Bathing* from c. 1621, held at the Museum Boymans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (**fig. 9**),[30] remains unnoticed. Still, it is impossible not to call the work voyeuristic. In the history of European painting, there are not many female nudes rendered with such tenderness as in the Rotterdam canvas. Although the theme is strongly rooted in tradition, the innovative and direct view is astonishing. It would be futile to look for suggestive dissoluteness or any attempt at elevation here; there is just pure visualization, the intention to depict nudity as something innocent – like it was before the exile from paradise. The view is so intimate that it seems to document an event witnessed in the forest, with the impulse for its creation being the act of looking, observation and the will to record the witnessed sight. The motif of Actaeon turned into a stag and torn by his dogs, borrowed from the myth of Diana, is almost indiscernible in the painting. Guercino surprises us here: the painter, regarded primarily as a Classicist, could have well done without the mythological pretext. An astute observer, he painted his models as if having caught them when they did not feel watched. Their ablutions are an ordinary bath rather than the mythological *preludia amoris*. The women are not depicted in a sensual way: one is shown from behind while drying her legs, the other is clumsily undressing in a pose that would have been deemed innovative even two hundred years later. The models' bodies are painted with clear respect and sympathy. Their nudity is devoid of a perverse tinge. Guercino portrayed the idyllic and prosaic nature of an ordinary bath; it seems that the sole act of observation is satisfactory to both the viewer and the artist. Another proof of such careful surveillance of the surrounding world is a drawing from c. 1635 held at the Courtauld Gallery in London (**fig. 10**).[31] It depicts two women with their heads down, drying their long, thick hair. A rare occurrence in the 17th century, the drawing documents fascination with the mysterious world of women and its everyday rituals, rather than with the eroticism of the female body.

The following question arises in the context of earlier deliberations: what did drawing or painting from a naked model look like in Guercino's Italy? How did the artist work on female nudes? Is it possible that he had nude models posing for him? And if so – who were these women? The question of artistic methods and sources of painting naked female bodies in post-Tridentine Italian art was closely associated with understanding sensuality, the do's and

[29] Inv. no. D.1952.RW.1346.

[30] *Nell'eta' di Correggio e dei Carrracci*, Andrea Emiliani, ed., exh. cat., Pinacoteca Nazionale e Accademia di Belle Arti, Bologna; National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1986–87 (Milan, 1986), pp. 466–67; *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino 1591–1666*, Denis Mahon, ed., exh. cat., Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna, 1991; Schirn–Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 1991–92 (Bologna, 1991), p. 98, cat. no. 33; *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento...*, op. cit., p. 147.

[31] Inv. no. D.1952.RW.1359.

don'ts and morals of the time. The now commonplace representation of a nude model posing for the artist, present in art since the late 19th century, was surrounded with a strong aura of immorality in the 17th century. If nudity revealed in the painting was anchored in reality, mirroring the sensual eroticism of a live model, it took on a suggestive quality. Using models based on ancient artistic standards or on the Old Masters was a different matter. In 17th-century art, the erotic charge of nudity "filtered" by standards of the past was much lower.

Drawing from a live model was a widespread practice in Italy already in the 16th century. It is precisely for this purpose that Guercino established his Accademia del Nudo in Cento (in 1616). Artists usually used their assistants (*garzoni*) as models, but external models were also hired occasionally (there are surviving documents containing the prices of their work). The matter complicates itself in the case of female nudes. 16th-century historiographers, such as Giorgio Vasari or Giovanni Battista Armenini, underlined the need to draw persons of both sexes from the live model.[32] So, the theory of art allowed painting female models in the nude. How often they were hired by Italian artists is debated by contemporary critics; based on surviving drawings, we may safely assume that the models who posed for them were women. However, 17th-century documents from the Accademia del Disegno in Florence or the Accademia dei Incamminati in Bologna make no mention of female models, which may suggest that Florentine and Bolognese painters referred to artistic rather than live women models. In his letter to Federico Gonzaga of 6 July 1527, Pietro Aretino wrote about a sculpture of Venus which "filled anyone who looked at it with desire."[33] We know that artists often modelled themselves on ancient statues of goddesses, while many of them, based on the principle of *aemulatio*, used contemporary works in their practice. For instance, Francesco Salviati copied female figures from Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*; others copied ancient sculptures.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, naked women posing in painters' workshops were a rare sight – these were mostly prostitutes who charged high prices for their services. In a letter of 1522, Titian mentions the extraordinary usefulness of Venetian courtesans in this respect.[34] Models' promiscuity, or even dissoluteness, was also described by Benvenuto Cellini, who used the beautiful Frenchwoman Caterina as both a model and courtesan, paying her thirty scudi a day for posing in the nude.[35] In 1541, Lorenzo Lotto complained that a naked model cost him as much as ten scudi;[36] the high prices of posing women were also bemoaned by Artemisia Gentileschi.[37]

Therefore, one of the obstacles to hiring courtesans as models could be their high prices. Yet in the case of Guercino's prosperous workshop, if we believe biographers describing the painter's exquisite circumspection, moral scruples may have acted as a more serious limitation. Malvasia does mention, however, that Guercino's model for the aforementioned *Susannah and the Elders*, made for cardinal Alessandro Ludovisi (the future Pope Gregory XV), was

[32] Giovanni Battista Armenini, *De veri precetti della Pittura* [1587] (Ravenna, 1977), p. 112.

[33] See Pietro Aretino in a letter to Federico Gonzaga of 6 July 1527. See also Pietro Aretino, *Lettere sull'arte*, Ettore Camesasca, ed., vol. 1 (Milan, 1957–60), p. 17.

[34] Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women* (New Haven, 1997), pp. 82, 296.

[35] *Benvenuta Celliniego żywot własny*, tr. Leopold Staff (Warsaw, 1949), p. 244.

[36] As cited in: *Federico Barocci. Renaissance Master of Color and Line*, op. cit., pp. 42–44.

[37] Artemisia Gentitleschi in a letter to Don Antonio Ruffo of 12 June 1649 – see *Lettere di Artemisia. Edizione critica e annotata con quarantatre documenti inediti*, Francesco Solinas, ed., with Michele Nicolaci and Yuri Primarosa (Paris–Florence–Rome, 2011), p. 129.

a beautiful young woman, a criminal from the Archbishop's prison.[38] The verve and ease characterizing two drawings of female nudes from the collection of the British Museum (**fig. 11**) and Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool[39] also give rise to assumptions that these are drawings from life, *primo pensiero* – first, spontaneous studies for paintings. Using light, clear lines and subtle wash (in the former) as well as distinctive hatching (in the latter), Guercino brilliantly conveyed the smoothness of female skin, the dynamics of gestures and the intimate moment of uncovering nakedness. Taking off the gown and lifting the curtain serve a similar purpose: nudity captured as it is being uncovered gains erotic power. While working on the paintings, Guercino was wont to consider different iconographic and compositional variants. At the same time, it is possible that these sketches represented autonomous works of art, drawn *per diletto* in order to please both the viewer and the artist himself. Still, they seem to be exceptions. Guercino could have also practiced drawing from a male model, as was customary in the 16th and 17th centuries, subsequently adding female anatomical characteristics: rounding hips and breasts in order to ultimately arrive at the female anatomy, proportions and charm. Looking at some of his paintings depicting female nudes with male musculature, this seems highly likely. It seems even more obvious if we compare Guercino's heroic nudes with those of Guido Cagnacci, extremely realistic in both their anatomical details and proportions. During his second stay in Rome (1621–22), Cagnacci was on friendly terms with Guercino – they even stayed at the same house.[40] His *Penitent Magdalene* is exciting, full of charm and probably based on a live model (**fig. 12**).[41] *The Penitent Magdalene* painted by Guercino is idealized and classical, subjected to the rules of *decorum*; this is a *nudita'* painted by a moralist based on old standards rather than nature.[42]

Tancred and Erminia – the Rhetoric of Love

Guercino's works depicting the twists, turns and dramas of love represented visual narratives combining past and present ideas. He borrowed his themes from the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome, the Old Testament and contemporary poetry. They were to provide entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, but often also contained a strong moral message. He almost invariable chose stories demonstrating ideal virtues such as valour, constancy, obedience and reason.

In *Felsina pittrice*, Malvasia wrote that Guercino "knew a lot of stories and fables."[43] Thereby, he drew the reader's attention to his characteristic predilection for folk legends and tales on the one hand, and on the other – to the set of themes borrowed from history, ancient mythology and poetry present in his painting. In Guercino's take, amorous *storie* and *favole* borrowed from literature almost invariably take on a moralizing tone. The artist innovatively adapts motifs from contemporary poetry. Apart from the moral lesson, what seems most important are the

[38] Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice...*, op. cit., p. 363 (2nd edition: vol. 2 (Bologna, 1841), p. 258); see also Denis Mahon, *Il Guercino. Dipinti*, exh. cat., Palazzo dell Archiginnasio, 1968 (Bologna, 1968), p. 54.

[39] The British Museum, inv. no. MK 169 and Walker Art Gallery, inv. no. WAG 10849, respectively.

[40] As cited in: *Misticismo del nudo...*, op. cit., p. 9.

[41] 1625–27, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, inv. no. 898 (F.N.1214).

[42] 1652–55, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, inv. no. 832.

[43] Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice – Vite de'pittori bolognesi*, vol. 2 (Bologna, 1678), p. 359.

attempts at depicting human feelings and emotions invoked by poetry, music and stage works of the time. Torquato Tasso (1544–95), and in particular his epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*, occupy a special place among Guercino's poetic inspirations. The poem takes place against the background of the First Crusade and the taking of Jerusalem in 1096. Guercino made a few works based on subjects borrowed from Tasso; there are several known versions of paintings depicting Erminia bending over the body of the lover, who does not requite her feelings. *Erminia Finding the Wounded Tancred* (private collection, Italy)[44] (**fig. 13**) is very evocative for the viewer on account of its dynamic composition.

This theme perfectly lent itself to building a composition that would abide by the ancient principle of *persuasio*, understood as the quest to take control over the viewer's feelings. Guercino depicted the remorse of penitents and sinners, the grief of women lamenting for Jesus at the foot of the cross; he celebrated scenes of despair and silent sobbing, the gesture of *ploro* (mourning), expressed in the rhetoric tradition by wringing or spreading one's arms and a melancholy countenance. He was particularly interested in depicting affects, i.e., emotions. During the Baroque, affects were the subject of theoretical treatises, while artists, musicians and actors were recommended to reveal them.[45] An important evidence of the weight that was attached to affects is *L'Arte de'Cenni*,[46] written by a lawyer and humanist Giovanni Bonifacio and published in Vicenza in 1616, in which the author precisely analyses almost all methods of what he calls *muta eloquenza* – mute eloquence. It is the competence of the entire body: the author's deliberations extend beyond the facial expression and gestures of the hands to ears, eyebrows, mouth, navel and even genitals, which are important for the rhetoric of obscene gestures. The Baroque theory of affects was closely connected to rhetoric, i.e., the art of presenting emotional phenomena and conditions in a convincing manner. Guercino seems to implement the assumptions of Bonifacio's treatise, exploring the subject of mute sobbing. In his work, Bonifacio defines eleven types of tears, including *lacrime degli amanti* and *lacrime per altrui morte*.[47] In *Erminia Finding the Wounded Tancred*, Guercino painted lover's tears, *lacrime degli amanti*, with unprecedented precision. This early work features one of the most important characteristics of his painting: the ability to accurately capture the essence of human actions – the moment that lends it greatest weight. The artist depicts the clear, rhetoric gestures of the persons of the drama in a harmonious, almost musical rhythm. Pursuant to the *ut pictura poesis* principle, he equips the painting with a similar role, form and expression as the poetic work that served as its inspiration. In his painting, the atmosphere of the composition is achieved by the placidity of the dying Tancred contrasted with Erminia's dramatically outstretched arms, symbolizing despair. This stylistically unparalleled work must have astonished Guercino's contemporaries. The composition of the scene is innovative and carefully thought out. It is striking in its dynamic, almost stage-like expression. The arrangement of persons in

[44] *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), p. 106, cat. no. I.25.

[45] René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* [1649], tr. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis, 1989); Mirosław Korolko, *Sztuka retoryki. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny* (Warsaw, 1998); Szymon Paczkowski, "Teoria afektów Athanasiusa Kirchera," *Muzyka*, no. 4 (1994), pp. 19–52; Jerzy Ziomek, *Retoryka opisowa* (Wrocław, 1990).

[46] Giovanni Bonifacio, *L'arte de'Cenni con la quale formandosi favella visibile. Si tratta della muta eloquenza che non e' altro che un facondo silentio: divisa in due parti* (Vicenza, 1616).

[47] G. Bonifacio, *L'arte de'Cenni...*, op. cit., pp. 150–52.

the foreground, as if on the proscenium, as well as the unique expression of gestures are a clear reference to the theatre. After all, Guercino owed a lot to the stage culture emanating from the Ducal Court of Ferrara – the cradle of modern theatre. It was at the Ferraran court of d'Este that the modern performative arts were reborn: not only antique dramas and comedies were staged there, but also contemporary works, e.g., by Ariosto and Tasso.

Heroines and Penitents

A reflection on the heroines, penitents, valiant and beautiful women from the Bible as well as ancient literature and history – Susannah, Mary Magdalene, Semiramis, Cleopatra and Lucretia – was a motif that reappeared in Guercino's art in many variants. These women were to constitute *exempla* of courage and moral values that conquered sin. Ironically, though, representations of semi-naked heroines were commissioned mostly on account of their bodily charms.

One of the recommendations of the Council of Trent (1545–63) was contemplating the sacrament of penance (*poenitentia*) and conversion, hence the popularity of images of Mary Magdalene, most often depicted in pious concentration. In the era of Counter-Reformation, showing the transformation of a sensual harlot into a saintly ascetic symbolized the victory of virtue over sin. In Guercino's paintings, Magdalene's penitence is depicted as a difficult extrasensory experience, a sign of the saint's special relationship with God. Guercino comes close to rejecting the vision of the saint based on sinful excitement with carnal beauty. If he refers to the old tradition, it is rather the tradition of nudity *all'antica*, associated with elevated love and heroic virtue. In his works, Magdalene's classical, heroic nudity should rather be interpreted as *nuditas virtualis* or *nuditas temporalis* – rejection of attire that symbolizes vanity and attachment to worldly possession; penitence and asceticism, which allow her to return to the state of innocence.

Guercino takes up the subjects of heroines traditionally associated with sensuality; he brings out the heroic part of their personalities.

The imagination of collectors of 17th-century artists, including Guercino, was aroused by scenes depicting the suicide of two most famous ancient women: Lucretia and Cleopatra. The motif of their death was intertwined with the story of lustful love. At the same time, between the 15th and 17th centuries, the figure of Lucretia enjoyed enormous popularity in literature, music and painting as the embodiment of civic virtues and marital fidelity. The story of Lucretia was described, i.a., by Livy in *Ab urbe condita*. The wife of Collatinus, she was raped by Sextus Tarquinius – son of king Tarquin the Proud – and, unable to stand the disgrace, stabbed herself with a dagger. The disgrace and death of Lucretia led to the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome, meaning the abolition of monarchy and creation of the republic. Therefore, her figure went on to symbolize *Fortitudine* (Fortitude) and *Giustitia* (Justice). Guercino took up the motif of Lucretia's suicide several times.[48] In his eyes, the story of the Roman heroine represented the model of feminine virtue, while his paintings featuring Lucretia were to serve as a reminder of honour and marital duties.

The turbulent history of Cleopatra, the last queen of Egypt, was also particularly inspiring for 17th-century painters: she became the subject of an unprecedented number of works, especially in

[48] Detailed study of the motif of Lucretia in Guercino's art: *Guercino e Lucrezia. Un dipinto inedito a Cento*, Nicholas Turner, ed., exh. cat., Pinacoteca Civica "Il Guercino", 2009 (Cento, 2009).

Bologna and Emilia. The most important motif for modern artists was her unearthly beauty and mysterious death. Cleopatra's death could be a political suicide, but it is sometimes interpreted as a suicide out of love, motivated by despair following the death of her lover Antony. We know a number of Guercino's works depicting this iconographic subject. The figure of Cleopatra was incredibly inspiring for the painter, like for his friend from the Roman years, Guido Cagnacci.[49] In each of the works, Guercino presented this theme in a different view, experimenting with the subject and conveying its various aspects within the canvas, analysing subsequent stages of suicide and at the same time portraying various aspects of female beauty in the critical moment of death. Around 1621, his Cleopatra is raising her eyes to the heavens, full of internal energy; she is depicted in the decisive, emotionally loaded moment of reaching to the fruit basket for the deadly snake (The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, c. 1621)[50] (**fig. 14**). In the 1630s, he created an intimate image of the exceptionally beautiful queen, with her lips parted and her breasts bare, caught in the moment of inflicting death upon herself (Pinacoteca Civica, Cento, 1637–39).[51] 1648 was when he completed his most sensual canvas: Cleopatra is dead, naked, covered with nothing but a light fabric and depicted on an exquisite bed in the traditional pose of the sleeping Venus (Galleria d'arte del Comune, Palazzo Rosso, Genoa, 1648)[52] (**fig. 15**).

In the 17th century, paintings depicting the death of Cleopatra or Lucretia's suicide were commissioned as engagement gifts; like Venetian images of Venus, they were to please the eye, but also to serve as an example. The popularity of works portraying beautiful and courageous women is explained by adapting delicate erotic nuance to the elevated subject of heroic death. However, in Guercino's paintings, the moralizing effect, devoid of suggestive overtones, is always the most important element of the composition.

Love and Lust in a Post-Tridentine View

Guercino is one of those 17th-century painters who managed to create his characteristic imagery – the scope of his own favourite subjects. At various stages of his practice, we see a recurring iconography based on the Bible, taking up the subjects of temptation, sinful love, the choice between good and evil, betrayal and hurt innocence. Even though this is a general characteristic of Italian painting created in Guercino's time and circle – appearing, i.a., in the oeuvre of Guido Reni, Artemisia Gentileschi or Guido Cagnacci – it is extremely consistent and coherent in the works of the master from Centro.

[49] For more information on Guido Cagnacci's painting *Death of Cleopatra* (c. 1660–61) from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, see *Maestri della pittura del Seicento emiliano*, Francesco Arcangeli, Maurizio Calvesi, Gian Carlo Cavalli et al., eds, exh. cat., Pinacoteca Nazionale di Emilia-Romagna, Bologna, 1959 (Bologna, 1959), pp. 276, 285–86, cat. no. 151; Pier Giorgio Pasini, *Guido Cagnacci. Pittore (1601 –1663). Catalogo generale*, with appendix by G. Ludovico Masetti Zannini (Rimini, 1986), tab. XLIX, L, pp. 283–85, cat. no. 70; "Guido Cagnacci," in *La scuola di Guido Reni*, Emilio Negro, Massimo Pirondini, eds (Modena, 1992), pp. 87–108; *Guido Cagnacci*, Daniele Benati, Marco Bona Castellotti, eds, exh. cat., Museo delle Città, Rimini, 1993 (Milan, 1993), pp. 170–72, cat. no. 42; *Il gusto Bolognese. Barockmalerai aus der Emilia-Romagna*, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, ed., exh. cat., Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1994 (Bologna, 1994), p. XXX, cat. no. 26; *Transalpinum. Od Giorgiona i Dürera do Tycjana i Rubensa*, Dorota Folga-Januszewska, Antoni Ziemba, eds, exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 2004 (Warsaw, 2004), pp. 230–31, cat. no. 63.

[50] Inv. no. F.1973.30.P; *Misticismo del nudo...*, op. cit., p. 8.

[51] *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino 1591–1666*, op. cit., pp. 231–33, cat. no. 83; *Guercino. Poesia e sentimento...*, op. cit., n. 41, p. 174.

[52] *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino 1591–1666*, op. cit., p. 310, cat. no. 117.

One of the themes for which Guercino had a special predilection was the aforementioned motif of Susannah and the elders. In a later version of this representation, created in 1649–50 and held at Galleria Nazionale in Parma (**fig. 16**),[53] the figures bring to mind actors, whose role is to personify lust, temptation and virtue. This reserved and classical painting, created in Guercino's mature period, differs from the first, above-mentioned version of this theme from 1617, currently in the collection of the Museo del Prado in Madrid. The artist narrowed the frame; the figures are depicted in the foreground, right next to the surface of the painting. Guercino masterfully conveyed the atmosphere of muted conflict, the dramatic exchange of gestures: lust on the one hand and surrendering oneself to God on the other. The Biblical elders are Jewish judges, who – upon seeing Susannah in the garden of her house – are consumed by passion. Susannah's response and at the same time the basic motif of the painting is trust in God. The woman's attention is directed solely at the sky. Guercino eliminates all redundant elements, limiting the composition to a concise group of three figures. The viewer's gaze follows the rhythm of suggestive, rhetorical gestures. Contrary to the earlier Prado version, the painting does not focus on voyeurism, prying or temptation. This time, Guercino presents a reflection on the complete trust in, and surrender to, God, which was recommended by Counter-Reformation. The dynamics of the work is achieved thanks to a theatrical sense of reducing and omitting superfluous details. The accurate combination of suggestive realism of the simple gestures with erotic tension on the one hand and a religious message on the other – all this contributes to the characteristic power of this image.

In his two paintings of *Lot and His Daughters* (1650 and 1651–52), Guercino the moralist took up the subject of the most sinful, incestuous love. The story of Lot's dissolute daughters, who inebriate their father in order to lie with him, was to act as a warning against immoral female sexuality. In the Biblical account, Lot was just, as God had saved him from the burning Sodom, seen in the background of the painting. He is but a passive victim of his daughters' scheme. Guercino upholds the stereotype that Lot's only fault was carelessness and lack of moderation. In both paintings, sensuality is in the background, while the representation is built on didacticism: the painter shows the way to true religiousness and moderation.

Like the aforementioned *Susannah and the Elders*, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (**fig. 17**) and *Amnon and Tamar* (**fig. 18**) (1649–50, National Gallery, Washington), painted as a pair, tell the Biblical tale of wronged innocence. Joseph, tempted by the wife of his master Potiphar (Genesis 39:1–20), does not succumb to the temptation, remaining faithful to God and his superior. His virtue triumphed, like that of Susannah. On the other hand, the story of half-siblings Amnon and Tamar is one without a happy end. The Book of Samuel (2 Sam 13) makes a mention of Tamar's heavenly beauty. Her lovesick half-brother Amnon deceitfully lured her to his chamber and tried to convince her to lie with him, eventually raping her when she declined. God's punishment would only reach him after several years. Guercino is showing the moment when Amnon, having satiated his passion, loses interest in Tamar and rejects her with a theatrical, stern gesture. The statement Guercino makes through the pair of paintings – dealing with victorious and fallen virtue, respectively – can be interpreted as domestic religious instruction. Hung alongside each other, they were to teach and create a clear pictorial

[53] Luigi Salerno, *I dipinti del Guercino* (Rome, 1988), p. 337, cat. no. 267; *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino 1591–1666...*, op. cit., p. 328, cat. no. 125; David M. Stone, *Guercino. Catalogo completo dei dipinti* (Florence, 1991), p. 263, cat. no. 254; Lucia Fornari Schanchi, *Galleria Nazionale di Parma. Catalogo delle opere, Il Seicento* (Milan, 1999), pp. 113–14 (with previous bibliography).

narrative. In both Biblical stories *passio* – uncontrolled passion – results in doom. It follows that one of the permanent elements of Guercino's imagery is the moral lesson – expressed through various, albeit simple, almost folk means – on the invariable ethical principles one should abide by in order to be a good Christian. All dispositions of the mind and will, as well as the senses, should serve this purpose.

Contrary to the common belief, the essence of the Council of Trent was not just a reaction to Protestantism that spread around Europe in the 16th century. What seems much more important is the fact that Counter-Reformation was actually a "Catholic reformation" – a thorough revival of the Church that introduced the idea to practice religion in direct contact with God, the idea of individual, personal faith developed on many layers: intellectual, mystical and in everyday life. In took into account ordinary, simple, emotional piety. This view and key of the *tridentinum* theology seems closest to Guercino. In his works, true virtue emerges the most triumphant in adverse circumstances, when sin appears truly tempting and virtue is cultivated with difficulty. Hence the abundance of representations of *occasio* (opportunities to commit a sin) in the iconography of the master from Cento. Consequently, one might say that the subject of Guercino's paintings is the possibility to choose as well as the consolidated, firm attitude of virtue, which – in spite of being difficult – adds order to emotions and acts as a source of harmony.

In the history of art, Guercino is sometimes treated as an Academic Classicist. Somewhat rightly. Together with Guido Reni, he belonged to the generation of continuators of the Carracci Academy. In 1616, he opened Accademia del Nudo – a class of drawing from the live model – in the house of his patron Bartolomeo Fabri in his native Cento. He made anatomical pattern books for his pupils, he was faithful to academic subjects and the iconography approved by the Catholic church. However, Guercino's art escapes such one-sided categorization, as it borrows not just from the Academic Classicism of the Carracci, but also from the expressive line of North Italian painting. The latter manifested itself in his paintings and drawings depicting everyday scenes: a proof of his penchant for the careful observation of reality and an astonishing example of absolute innovativeness and dynamic presentation. Although the oeuvre of the master from Centro is deeply rooted in the tradition of post-Tridentine imagery and has a clear didactic aspect, it is also characterized by extreme lightness, ease, sensuality and a fresh perspective. His paintings are not moralizingly dull or academically repetitive – their originality against the background of contemporary artistic production is striking. They seem to confirm the opinion expressed in 1617 by Ludovico Carracci in a letter to Carlo Ferrante, who stated that the art of the young master from Cento was "like a breath of fresh air in Bolognese painting."[54] The stylistically unparalleled works must have astonished Guercino's contemporaries. They were original and carefully thought out. The essence of Guercino's art was splendidly described by Andrea Emiliani, who described him as situated between the expressive Caravaggio and the classical Guido Reni.[55]

The two most important sources of Guercino's painting are the desire to fulfil the teachings of the Catholic church as well as observation and will to imitate natural phenomena, i.e., the ambition to truthfully render the physical nature of objects. On the one hand, he was fascinated

[54] As cited in: Giovanni Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere sulla Pittura* (Rome, 1754), vol. 1, pp. 198–99; see also *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino 1591–1666...* , op. cit., p. 69.

[55] *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, Il Guercino 1591–1666...*, op. cit., p. XVI.

by the illusionistic nature of Biblical, ideological and literary fiction, on the other – by mimetic illusion. These are the two extremes that informed his art, which are at the same time the two extremes of 17th-century Italian painting. Seemingly apart, they become united in Guercino's works in order to surprise the viewer, who is facing a work that deceives the senses. His works contain sensuality and an interest in man as a sexual being who is subject to passions. Apart from several aforementioned, direct drawings of female nudes, sketched from the live model with extreme ease, the oeuvre of the master from Cento includes an erotic drawing executed in fine, bashful lines on the back of a landscape held at the British Museum. It depicts a male penis approaching female genitals – a study of physical excitement and arousal.[56] This bold drawing by Guercino was definitely not meant to depict "frolics" or "unseemly charms," which one of the Tridentine decrees ordered to avoid. If Guercino depicts nudity, this is a nudity that brings a moral message or – like in the *Landscape with Women Bathing* from Rotterdam, the sensual sketches of undressing women and the above-mentioned intimate drawing – a recording of a realistic observation or, rather, of the wonder at the physicality of the world. Amorous imagery in Guercino's art is related to the idea of the continuous shaping of personality and combating imperfections, as love is not devoid of its carnal aspect. Even elevated, it retains a sexual element in the background, the motif of lust and insatiability. The Tridentine revival of religious life emphasized didacticism, penance, repentance and mystical contemplation. In Guercino's art, this contemplation also pertains to the question of earthly love.

In the *Self-Portrait* from Washington mentioned at the beginning, the painter crosses the conventional border between imagined and real space, and enters the space of the viewer, presenting himself as a go-between between the viewer and the painting, which acts as an allegorical interpretation of the idea of love. Like in almost all paintings discussed here, illusion serves to convince the viewer and take control of his feelings. Guercino portrays himself as a go-between, a painter-preacher (*christianus pictor*), whose work provides the interpretation of love. Like in religious painting, he takes up and depicts moral subjects. However, the reflection on faithful and eternal love contained in the *Self-Portrait* would be devoid of its exquisite freshness, power and depth without the context of analysing the various aspects and topics related to amorous iconography in Guercino's entire body of work.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

[56] *Drawings by Guercino from British collections with an appendix describing the drawings by Guercino, his school and his followers in the British Museum*, Nicolas Turner, Carol Plazzotta, eds, exh. cat., The British Museum, London, 1991 (London, 1991), p. 275.