

# Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

GIOVANNI FRANCESCO BARBIERI, CALLED IL GUERCINO

(1591 - 1666)

*L'Amore virtuoso or Allegory of the Arts*

Oil on canvas, 41 7/16 x 59 7/8 in (105.3 x 152 cm).



## PROVENANCE

Purchased in 1654 by Giovanni Donato Correggio (1609-1674), Venice, as confirmed by the list of “original paintings” (“Originali quadri pagati da me”) paid for by Giovan Donato Correggio himself, described thus: “Un quadro entrovi un Amorino nudo virtuoso ingenuo sopra due libri con una testa di marmo, liuto e violino; in mano un libro da cantar e poi scarpelli, martello e tavoletta perelli e subiotto; opera delle più belle abbia fatto il signor Giovanni Francesco Barbieri detto Guercino costa d[ucati] 75 et porto d[ucati] 3 in tutto d[ucati] 78”. The painting is listed prominently in the patron’s posthumous inventory of 1674 (*L’inventario topografico del palazzo di San Cassiano* [on the Grand Canal]): “Un altro quadro con un fantolin che canta di musica di Guerzin da Cento con soaze intagliate negre e oro”; and it was no doubt housed in this palazzo until the beginning of the 18th century (see Barbara Guelfi, ed., *Il Libro dei conti del Guercino 1629-1666*, Venice, 1997, p. 165, no. 482; Linda Borean, *La quadreria di Agostino e Giovan Donato Correggio nel collezionismo veneziano del Seicento*, Udine, 2000, pp. 117, 178, 203). Richard, 4th Baron Coleridge (1905-1984); sold by his heirs at Sotheby’s, London, 6 June 2006, lot 214; London, private collection.

## LITERATURE

- Nicholas Turner, ed., *Guercino, la scuola, la maniera. I disegni agli Uffizi*, Florence, 2008, pp. 82-83, under no. 40;

- Francesca Baldassari, “Ancora un Guercino ‘veneziano’: l’amore virtuoso per Giovanni Donato Correggio”, *Nuovi Studi*, 14, 2008, pp. 141-143;
- Véronique Damian, *Massimo Stanzione, Guercino, Hendrick de Somer et Fra' Galgario*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2016, pp. 26-31.

Guercino’s account book (*Libro dei conti*) – begun in 1629, and an indispensable source for the rediscovery for the artist’s oeuvre – contains a reference, dated 20 May 1654, to a payment for a work called *Amor Virtuoso*: “Dal Ill.mo Sig:r Gio Donato Correggio [...] Si ne riceue per pagamento del Amor Virtuoso Ducatoni Cinquanta [...]”.<sup>1</sup> If this brief mention made it difficult to securely identify the picture in question, the publication of the “Nota del costo dei quadri ...” (a list of prices paid for paintings, 1646-1674) of the Correggio family of Venice, with a precise description of our composition, leaves no doubt since its recent reappearance, as Francesca Baldassari was able to prove in an article of 2008. In fact the Correggio archives, attentively published by Linda Borean in an exemplary study of this family of late seventeenth-century Venetian collectors, are specific: a little naked figure of “virtuous” Love holds a score, surrounded by musical instruments (flute, lute, violin), attributes of painting (palette and brushes) and sculpture (hammer and chisel, and a carved marble head), and set against a background defined by drapery and landscape.<sup>2</sup> It is also specified that this is one of the finest works painted by the great painter from Cento who had then been active for twelve years in Bologna, where he held the position of principal painter after the death of Guido Reni in 1642. The figure of *Amor virtuoso* in the centre of the composition strikes a Classicizing pose: unsteadily placed on a flat stone, on the ground<sup>3</sup>, and leaning on his right hand, he raises an open book in his left hand, which stands out against the lapis lazuli blue of the sky. The precious pigment has an intense tonality, and also tells us what a significant commission this was; a year later, in 1655, Guercino painted a composition once again based on the theme of love, in this instance an *Allegory of Eternal Fidelity* (Washington, National Gallery of Art), another painting that has only recently reappeared.<sup>4</sup>

Nicholas Turner has suggested that a red chalk drawing in Florence (Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe) might be an initial idea for this figure of Love, although the composition is reversed; but although the play of hands is different, the upper body is very similar.<sup>5</sup>

The delicacy of handling can be seen in pronounced visual effects such as the description of the heavy crimson curtain, or the juxtaposition of the lapis blue sky and the pink of the setting sun. Finally, archival documents offer support for our appreciation of the picture, which has a firmly documented place within the artist’s career, and is fully autograph.

To whom was this Virtuous Love of Art addressed, if not the patron himself? Giovan Donato Correggio (1608-1674), and to a lesser extent his brother Agostino (1604-1678), devoted himself especially to forming a collection of contemporary painting, *ex novo*; this was so renowned that it was praised at length by Marco Boschini in his *Carta del navegar pitoresco* (1660).<sup>6</sup> His taste reflects the development of painting in Venice, of which Giovan Donato was a true promoter, commissioning works from Girolamo Forabosco (1605-1679), Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644), as well as the Austrian painter Johan Anton Eismann (1604-1698) and Johann Carl Loth (1632-1698). He had himself portrayed as Perseus by Strozzi (the work is now in the Musée Magnin, Dijon). His collection aimed to represent the various schools of Italian painting, from north to south, and there was thus a privileged relationship with Guercino between 1654 and 1657. Yet a perusal of this inventory also reveals the names of the great painters of the sixteenth century such as Tintoretto (1518-1594) and Bassano, and attests to a wish for a diversified collection, and open to the world beyond the Veneto: one also comes across Bronzino (1503-1572) and Salviati. The Correggio family was originally from Bergamo, and settled in Venice as merchants in the sixteenth century. In 1646, they obtained the title of patricians and bought a palazzo on the Grand Canal at San Cassiano.

Our Emilian artist, nicknamed Guercino (the squinter) because he was cross-eyed, was highly prolific, as proved by his *Libro dei conti*, and very successful. Born in the provincial town of Cento, where he was trained by Benedetto Gennari the Elder (1563-1610), he settled in Bologna in 1617, no doubt encouraged by the fame of Ludovico Carracci (1555-1619). In 1621 he went to Rome, where he worked for Alessandro Ludovisi, whom he had met in Bologna, and who had just become Pope Gregory XV. He decorated the Casino Ludovisi and Palazzo Patrizi, and painted *The Burial and Assumption of Saint Petronilla* for Saint Peter's (1623; Rome, Pinacoteca Capitolina). When the Pope died he returned to Cento, but because of subsequent military conflicts he sought refuge in 1642 in Bologna, where he worked until the end of his life, having become the leading artist of the Bolognese School. He is buried in the church of San Salvatore in Bologna, near his brother and collaborator, the still life painter Paolo Antonio Barbieri (1603-1649).

#### Notes:

1. Barbara Guelfi, ed., *Il Libro dei conti del Guercino 1629-1666*, Venice, 1997, p. 165, no. 482.
2. Linda Borean, *La quadreria di Agostino e Giovan Donato Correggio nel collezionismo veneziano del Seicento*, Udine, 2000, pp. 117, 178; Linda Borean and Stefania Mason, eds., *Il collezionismo d'arte a Venezia. Il Seicento*, Venice, 2011, pp. 251-252.
3. In fact the little Amor rests on two slabs of stone which were interpreted by the author of the purchases made by Giovan Donato Correggio as "books".
4. Francesca Baldassari, "L'Amore Fedele ed Eterno del Guercino", *Nuovi Studi*, 11, 2005, pp. 265-268.
5. See Nicholas Turner, ed., *Guercino la scuola, la maniera. I disegni agli Uffizi*, Florence, 2008, pp. 82-83, under no. 40. I am grateful to David M. Stone for pointing this out to me.
6. Marco Boschini, *Carta del navegar pitoresco*, Venice [1660], critical ed. by Anna Pallucchini, Venice and Rome, 1966, pp. 599-605.