Guercino, Study for a “Hercules with the Club”

Carina Fryklund, Curator, Old Master Drawings and Paintings
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**The Nationalmuseum** has acquired a red-chalk study for a “Hercules” in three-quarter length by the Italian Baroque artist Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591–1666), nicknamed Il Guercino (from his squint). A significant work of the artist’s maturity, this previously unpublished drawing must date from the 1640s (Fig. 1).¹

Born in Cento, a small town between Bologna and Ferrara, in 1591, Guercino became a leading figure in the second generation of artists active in Emilia. Inspired by the reform of painting brought about by the Carracci in Bologna around 1600, he was also deeply influenced by an earlier artist, the Parmese painter Antonio Allegri, called Correggio, whose subtle treatment of light and fluidity of touch he emulated. Guercino was among the most prolific draughtsmen of 17th-century Italy. His preferred medium was pen and brown ink, but at various times in his career he also worked in red chalk, black chalk and charcoal.² His indebtedness to Correggio is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his red-chalk drawings. Impressed by the effects of softness, luminosity and grace achieved by Correggio in this medium,

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¹ Fig. 1 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Guercino (1591–1666), *Hercules, in Three-Quarter Length*, 1640s. Red chalk, 26.2 x 17 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 1/2016.
Guercino exploited its painterly softness to convey a lifelike quality with a mastery few other artists have equaled.

Hercules, the demi-god of classical mythology born from the union of Jupiter and Alcmene, married Megara, the daughter of King Creon of Thebes, by whom he had three children. In a fit of madness, he killed Megara and the children, and to atone for his terrible deed he was given the famous twelve labours to complete. His usual attributes are a lion skin, a trophy from his first heroic labour, and a club, obtained by uprooting an olive tree with his bare hands. Studied from a model who posed in the studio, Hercules is portrayed as a muscular bearded man, swinging his club high above his head as he strides forward towards the left. He is shown as a man of action, the very personification of courage and physical strength. The model’s naked body, lit from above and from the left, is partially enveloped by swirling folds of diaphanous drapery. The beauty of Guercino’s drawing arises from the artist’s rapidity of touch, the “gustosa facilità” for which his Bolognese biographer, the art historian Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616–1693), praised the artist’s drawings in his Vite of 1678. Guercino’s exceptional ability to capture the most delicate gradations of light over flesh, exploiting the warmth of hue inherent in red chalk, is evident in the areas of parallel hatching and stumping used to indicate the subtle tonal transitions between the half-tones and the lights in the figure’s chest and under his right forearm.

Guercino generally submitted his compositions to a continuous process of change and refinement. His drawings were often made in order to clarify his ideas in relation to a given composition before he worked with the brush on canvas. In preliminary studies he explores the pose of his subjects and experiments with the lighting of the figures from different angles. From surviving documents we know that during the 1640s he made several paintings of a “Hercules” in half-

Fig. 2 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Guercino (1591–1666), Hercules, 1640s. Black chalk, 23.9 x 15 cm. The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA1863.712.
figure. The present sheet shares certain features with two other drawings by the artist, a black-chalk figural study in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Fig. 2), and a recently rediscovered pen-and-ink study now in the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Fig. 3). All three studies may be related to a painting rediscovered in 2003 and today in the collection of Luigi Koelliker, Milan. This is believed to have been painted on commission in 1641 for Alessandro Argoli of Ferrara, to whom it was delivered the following year (Fig. 4). By showing the hero caught in mid-action, as he readies himself to strike the enemy with a sweeping downward movement of his right arm, the Stockholm sheet differs from those at Oxford and Minneapolis, both of which depict the model with the club over his shoulder in a pose closer to the finished painting. As in the Oxford sheet, the model here is moving towards the left, but his head is turned in the opposite direction, and his raised right forearm casts a dark shadow across the lower half of his face, reinforcing the expression of concentration upon the task at hand. Guercino may well have produced further studies for the painting which no longer survive.

Guercino appears to have kept the majority of his drawings throughout his long career. On his death at Bologna in 1666, all of the numerous surviving sheets in his studio passed to his nephews and heirs, the painters Benedetto and Cesare Gennari. Drawings by Guercino – figural and compositional studies, landscapes, caricatures and genre scenes – were coveted by later collectors and connoisseurs, among them the influential 18th-century amateur Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694–1774), who owned a substantial number of sheets by the artist. In addition to a still unidentified collector’s mark, the present drawing bears the monogram of Count Nils Barck (1820–1896), a Swedish adventurer resident in Paris from 1840. Barck belonged to the intimate circle of Prince Louis Bonaparte, later Emperor Napoleon III, with whom he had earlier associated in England. In Sweden, Barck had received from Count Magnus Stenbock (1800–1871), in exchange for some antique bronzes, a group of important drawings of Crozat provenance that had formed part of the diplomat and art collector Count Carl Gustaf Tessin’s (1695–1770) Christmas gift to Queen Lovisa Ulrika of Sweden in 1748. The present study, however, was not part of Tessin’s drawings collection, and it is still unclear where and when it was acquired by Barck.

Fig. 3 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Guercino (1591–1666), Hercules, 1640. Pen and brown ink, 18.3 x 17 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN, 2013.23.

Notes:
2. On Guercino as a draughtsman, see Denis Mahon, Il Guercino (exh. cat.), Palazzo dell’Archiginnasio, Bologna, 1969; D. Mahon...
and Nicholas Turner, The Drawings of Guercino in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, Cambridge 1989; and N. Turner, Guercino: Drawings from Windsor Castle (exh. cat.), Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX / The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC / The Drawing Center, New York, 1991–92. The Guercino drawings in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle are the largest single group of the artist’s drawings to have remained together and are representative of nearly every type. The group of drawings for a half-length “Atlas” of 1645 represents a rare survival in Guercino’s graphic oeuvre of an extensive series of preliminary studies for a single half-length figure.


7. Oil on canvas, 126.5 x 105 cm, Milan, Coll. Luigi Koeliker; see D. Mahon et al., Guercino: poesia e sentimento nella pittura del ‘600 (exh. cat.), Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2003–4, no. 46 (Massimo Pulini and Miriam di Penta); and M. di Penta, “Guercino’s Endymion, Hercules and Artemisia for Alessandro Argoli”, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, vol. 67, 2004, pp. 245–250. Argoli paid 80 scudi for the work upon delivery on 6 March 1642, and a few months later he offered it as a gift to Cardinal Francesco Barberini in Rome, where it is recorded by the end of July 1642. Cf. a version in a Bolognese private collection (oil on canvas, 127.5 x 104 cm), now considered to be a replica by Gennari; see Salerno 1988 (as in note 4), no. 345 (as Guercino).

8. Guercino’s personality as a draughtsman is succinctly characterised by Mariette in the catalogue of the Pierre Crozat sale in Paris in 1741: “L’on ne dira point que le Guerchin soit un dessinateur correct. Il s’en faut beaucoup […] Il plait cependant pour le moins autant qu’un dessinateur plus severe. C’est que les contours sont coulants & de chair, que ses Compositions sont grandes & nobles, & qu’il y a dans la distribution de son clair-obscur, une intelligence & et des effets merveilleux…” (pp. 57–58).

9. Lugt 474; as in note 1.


11. The present red-chalk drawing is not identical to a sheet listed under “Guerchin” in Tessin’s manuscript list of artworks sent to Sweden from Paris in 1739–42 (p. 57 left, “Demie figure d’Hercule – 10 sols”) and in the 1749 catalogue of his drawings collection (Livret 21, no. 54, “Demi figure d’Hercule à la plume”). The medium here is pen and ink, and the price indicated is far too cheap for an autograph Guercino drawing. The drawing listed in the inventories corresponds, rather, to a copy after the artist listed in Per Bjurström et al., Italian Drawings: Florence, Siena, Modena, Bologna, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 2002, no. 1571 (as follower of Guercino). The latter may possibly be a partial copy after a lost design for a fresco showing Hercules with the Vanquished Hydra; cf. the similar composition in a sheet sold by Christie’s, London, 16 July 2010, lot 127.