Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri)  
(Italian, 1591–1666)  
Christ and the Samaritan Woman, c. 1650  
by Kimberly Schrimsher

A long-ignored painting of Christ and the Samaritan Woman (fig. 1) by Giovanni Battista Barbieri or Il Guercino (1591–1666) in the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, provides an opportunity to reconsider the Baroque painter’s creative process. The High’s painting is one of a group of five canvases in which Guercino and/or his workshop visited the theme of Christ and the Samaritan Woman. The earliest of these, which was executed in the 1620s (fig. 2), has elicited positive attention in modern scholarship for its exuberant brushwork and so-called Caravaggesque style. However, the later versions (figs. 3, 4, 5) have elicited less than enthusiastic responses.¹ Dating to the 1640s, they are generally characterized as careful, austere, classicizing, and easily imitated. The High’s painting, which belongs to the latter group, was branded as a copy of the painting now owned by the Banco Popolare of Modena (see fig. 5) when it entered the High’s collection in 1981 and remained in obscurity until now.²

The main reason why the High’s painting was deemed to be a copy of the version now owned by the Modena bank relates to a larger problem that has plagued Guercino studies, namely, the painter’s pervasive reuse of motifs and figures.³ Guercino’s imitative practice—along with the construal of the painter’s cost-per-figure pricing structure as a direct reflection of a mechanical approach to painting—have given rise the modern perception of the painter as lacking the creative genius of his contemporary “the divine” Guido Reni (1575–1642).⁴ Instead of accepting the value-laden distinction on its own terms, this paper will shift the basis of discussion to fresh ground and consider what Guercino’s use of drawings reveals about the creative processes that produced the High’s painting and its variants. In the process, it will also begin to evaluate what copying might mean in the context of a group of works that creatively piece together material from a variety of sources. The scandal generated when artist Giovanni Lanfranco accused Domenichino of theft in his “copy” of a painting by Agostino Carracci demonstrates that the line between imitation and innovation was recognized and debated in the seventeenth century.⁵ From a modern perspective, it is by no means easy to draw a line between a derivative copy and an inventive one in a group works like the four paintings of Christ and the Samarian Woman produced by Guercino and his workshop in the 1640s.

With this problem in mind, this paper will begin with a close analysis of the relation between the High’s painting (see fig. 1), a supposed workshop copy, and its model (see fig. 5), the presumed authentic version. There are many similarities between the two works. Except for the mirror reversal of the well and the tree, the compositional frameworks of the two paintings are very close. The brass water pail, the well implements, and the indentations on the well appear almost identical in both versions. Yet, there are also many differences, ranging from the positioning of the figures to the background edifices. The most immediate, telling difference between the two canvases is in gestures of the two Christ figures. Christ’s gesture in the High’s canvas was previously explained
Fig. 1 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, c. 1650, oil on canvas; High Museum of Art, Gift of Julie and Arthur Montgomery, 1980.56.


Fig. 3 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, c. 1640-41, oil on canvas; Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, inv. no. 176 (1976.55).

Fig. 4 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, 1640–41, oil on canvas; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1965, 14809.

Fig. 5 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, 1647, oil on panel; Collezione Banco di S. Geminiano e S. Prospero-Banco Popolare, Modena.

Fig. 6 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), *Disegno e Colore*, c. 1640, oil on canvas; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.
as an insignificant variation presumably created by one of Guercino’s workshop protégés. In fact, the gestures in the two paintings appear to have been carefully chosen to convey discrete facets of the biblical story depicted. The Gospel of John 4:1-42 records that Christ successfully converts the Samaritan Woman to Christianity following a metaphysical discussion of the spiritual versus the physical properties of water. In the Modena version, Christ places one hand on his chest and points with his other to the woman’s water vessel, suggesting the attainability of spiritual salvation so long as the woman pledges her faith to Christ. Guercino underscores the theme of salvation by placing a barren tree in the shape of a cross on the horizon to the left of Christ. In the High’s canvas, the cross is noticeably absent, and Christ in turn presses his left thumb into the pointer figure of his right hand. This well-known rhetorical gesture denotes teaching, and its inclusion in conjunction with a scene of Christ and the Samaritan Woman intimates the importance of spreading Christianity in the post-Tridentine era.

Preparatory drawings for the High’s painting will prove useful in elucidating the artistic process that gave rise to such variations on a theme. But before moving to a consideration of specific cases, it is important to recognize the special importance that the predominantly self-taught Guercino placed on drawing. In Disegno e Colore (fig. 6), ca. 1640, Guercino conceptualized two essential elements of the artistic process, drawing and coloring, as male and female personifications. An elderly, bearded Disegno, wearing colors reminiscent of red chalk, black ink, and white heightening commonly used in drawing, tenderly presents a small drawing of a sleeping putto to his seated female companion, Colore. With her brushes and palette in hand, Colore gazes over her shoulder, intently scrutinizing the contours of the drawing before her. The image on Colore’s canvas confirms that she is indeed copying the sleeping putto and, in a sense, literally endowing the drawn image with brilliant colors and chiaroscuro effects. Unlike his Bolognese contemporaries, who generally saw disegno and colore as deeply co-involved, as they appear to be in Guido Reni’s painting of the same subject (fig. 7), Guercino saw a hierarchical relation between them. His painting of Disegno and Colore suggests drawing’s foundational and didactic role.

In actual practice, the relation between drawing and coloring in Guercino’s works is far from fixed. Underdrawing and pentimenti visible in the High’s painting show that Guercino made constant modifications in the practice of coloring (figs. 8, 9, 10). Comprehensive examinations of his body of graphic work confirm that the painter rarely executed presentation drawings. Rather than prefiguring an entire composition in a drawing, he made studies of isolated figures or gestures. Two surviving drawings that relate to both Christ and the woman in the High’s canvas (figs. 11, 12) typify the rapid, disjointed studies Guercino favored. After completing such studies, Guercino then cultivated the most successful elements to transfer to canvas—but as the drawings for the High’s painting show, he did not translate them verbatim.

If Guercino did not simply replicate his drawings on canvas or color in a set of contours, how then might we understand the priority given to drawing in his thought and practice? One answer to this question may be deduced from the artist’s personal collection, which by the 1650s comprised some several thousand drawings by the artist’s own hand. Letters reveal that Guercino received offers from patrons to purchase his drawings, but the painter always refused. In one such letter, Guercino defended his position by claiming that he required his drawing collection intact as a source of reference for the
Fig. 7 Guido Reni (Italian, 1575–1642), *Alliance between Disegno and Colore*, c. 1620–25, oil on canvas; Musée du Louvre, Inv. 534

Fig. 8 Christ and the Samaritan Woman, c. 1650 (detail); High Museum of Art

Fig. 9 Christ and the Samaritan Woman, c. 1650 (detail); High Museum of Art

Fig. 10 Christ and the Samaritan Woman, c. 1650 (detail); High Museum of Art

Fig. 11 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), Study for *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, c. 1649, pen and brown and brownish-grey wash; Royal Collection, Windsor Castle

Fig. 12 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), Profile study of the Samaritan Woman; sold, Sotheby’s New York Sale, January 29, 2013
creation of new compositions. This extraordinary claim, combined with documentary evidence suggesting that Guercino organized his drawings by subject matter, indicates that the artist utilized his drawing collection as a type of image repertory. Furthermore, recent scholarship has established that paintings executed late in Guercino’s career were created with the aid of drawings completed decades prior.

Complementing his own drawings, Guercino, at the time of his death owned an additional five hundred framed and countless other loose engravings and drawings by artists he admired including da Vinci, Titian, Correggio, and Raphael. Two prints from his collection prove relevant for the discussion of the High’s painting: an engraving of Christ and the Samaritan Woman by Annibale Carracci (1560–1609) (fig. 13). While Annibale executed several versions of this narrative over the course of his career, his canvas from 1604–1605 is the only prior instance I have found of the teaching gesture in conjunction with this biblical scene suggesting that he may have derived inspiration for this scene from his brother’s print. The similarities between Christ in Annibale’s painting and Guercino’s drawing are indeed striking and suggest that Guercino looked to his Bolognese predecessor for inspiration.

Guercino’s reliance on the graphic arts for the formation of his paintings can be traced back to his earliest documented work. In Carlo Cesare Malvasia’s Felsina pittrice of 1678, the biographer chronicled the lives of painters working in Bologna including Guercino. Malvasia knew the painter personally and recounted that Guercino’s first artistic endeavor was copying an engraving such as this one of the Madonna della Ghiara or the Madonna di Reggio on the façade of his parents’ house. Guercino’s painting unfortunately does not survive, but this formative experience established the painter’s lifelong relationship with prints.

In 1619, Guercino created a guide designed to teach aspiring artists how to draw. Entitled Initial Elements to Introduce the Young to Drawing (fig. 14), the manual contained twenty-two engravings after original drawings by Guercino and provided a variety of useful subjects for an artist-in-training, such as foreshortened studies of heads in profile, hands, feet, light effects, and twisted torsos (figs. 15, 16, 17, 18). Each engraving is essentially a deconstructed study of crucial components for the creation of a figural composition. The manual’s aim was to encourage the imitation of the forms and figures to enable a beginning artist to ultimately develop his own style. It proved to be excessively popular and was reprinted numerous times in both Italy and France over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Thinking about Guercino’s individual paintings as summations and re-articulations of the parts assembled in his collections of drawings and engravings sheds light not only on his own imitative practice but also on the practices by means of which his contemporaries would have evaluated his paintings. Guercino’s ideas on copying were not idiosyncratic, but rather part of a larger conversation about copying that was occurring in seventeenth-century Italy. As explained in Florio’s Italian/English dictionary of 1611, one of the senses of the term “copy” derived from the Latin copia, meaning abundance or plenitude. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian, whose writings underwent a resurgence in the seventeenth century, wrote at length about the quandary of copying in his Institutio Oratoria. In this text, Quintilian initially cautions against direct imitation, asserting the inferiority of a reproduction in relation to its
Fig. 13 Annibale Carracci (Italian, 1560–1609), Christ and the Samaritan Woman, 1604–5, oil on canvas; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemaeldegalerie, Vienna

Fig. 14 Il Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) (Italian, 1591–1666), Initial Elements to Introduce the Young to Drawing (Primi elementi per introdurre I giovani al disegno) [frontispiece], 1619, engraved by Oliviero Gatti; British Museum, London

Fig. 15 Initial Elements to Introduce the Young to Drawing (Primi elementi per introdurre I giovani al disegno)

Fig. 16 Initial Elements to Introduce the Young to Drawing (Primi elementi per introdurre I giovani al disegno)

Fig. 17 Initial Elements to Introduce the Young to Drawing (Primi elementi per introdurre I giovani al disegno)

Fig. 18 Initial Elements to Introduce the Young to Drawing (Primi elementi per introdurre I giovani al disegno)
original. However, he later modifies his stance when characterizing the perfect orator. He asserts that the actions, mannerisms, and comportment of great men should be scrutinized and stresses, “if we gain a thorough conception of all these matters, we shall then be such imitators as we ought to be.” Quintilian further extols that if a man “shall add to these borrowed qualities excellences of his own, so as to supply what is deficient in his models and to retrench what is redundant, [he?] will be the complete orator whom we desire to see.”

It remains unclear if Guercino ever read Quintilian, yet the author’s ideas on copying elucidate aspects of Guercino’s practice. As Quintilian instructed aspiring orators, Guercino, too, carefully studied aspects of successful works in order to emulate and reformulate them into a new works of art.

This same rhetorical model can be adapted to think about the reception of Guercino’s painting by his contemporaries. As Maria Loh argues with relation to seventeenth-century Italian viewers, “knowledgeable spectators proceeded both microscopically and telescopically when viewing images,” and were thus capable of synecdochally analyzing elements of a painting in order to envision its whole. Guercino’s collecting practices mirrored those of his elite patrons, who amassed collection of paintings, prints, drawings, and the decorative arts, thus cultivating the ability to form and identify visual associations across media. What previous scholars have labeled mechanical repetition in Guercino’s corpus needs to be considered in this light, where innovation is the product of active associative understanding. Through the re-formation of a recognizable repertory in the High’s canvas, Guercino re-invented biblical narrative in a manner that emphasized the importance of preaching and conversion to the Post-Tridentine Catholic church.

—Kimberly Schrimsher, Emory University, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Graduate Fellowship Program in Object-Centered Curatorial Research, 2016
Bibliography


Notes

1 Fried.
2 Zafran, 58.
3 Brooks and Silver, 11.
4 Spear, 592–602.
5 Cropper.
6 Zafran, 58.
8 Brooks and Silver, 9–11; Gozzi, 47; Cazort, xxiii.
9 Brooks and Silver, 12.
10 Guercino refused an offer from Don Antonio Ruffo from Messina in 1650 to purchase his drawing collection. Gozzi, 46.
11 Negro and Roio, 80.
12 Malvasia.
13 Gozzi, 17.
14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid., 192.
18 Ibid.
19 Loh, 489.